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MISS MIDDLETON'S LOVER

OR,

PARTED ON THEIR BRIDAL TOUR

A NOVEL

M 2880

BY

LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

AUTHOR OF

'FLORA TEMPLE;" "THE HEIRESS OF CAMERON HALL;" "THE CRIME OF HALLOWEEN;" "THE MYSTERY OF BLACK-TOR LIGHT-HOUSE;" "WHICH LOVE PROVED TRUE;" "IONIE, THE PRIDE OF THE MILL;" "A FATAL WOOING;" "DAISY BROOKS," ETC., ETC.

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THE NOVEL "MISS MIDDLETON'S LOVER" IS WRITTEN FROM THE PLAY ENTITLED "PARTED ON THEIR BRIDAL TOUR," BY THE SAME AUTHOR, WHICH HAS VERY RECENTLY BEEN BROUGHT OUT IN LONDON.

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MISS MIDDLETON'S LOVER.

CHAPTER I.

A CRY IN THE NIGHT.

"Perchance if we had never met,
I had been spared this sad regret,
This endless striving to forget.—
And yet I could not bear the pain
Of never seeing thee again!
Ah, leave me not—I love but thee,—
Blessing or curse which ere thou be;
Oh, be as thou hast been to me,
Forever and forever."

He was young, handsome, clever, gay, polished,—the last man in the world one would ever have suspected of being the hero of—a mystery.

He had been the most popular man at the clubs, much sought after in society, the beau ideal of the belles, and the idol of their mammas.

When he suddenly shut himself up alone in his beautiful home, dismissing all his servants save two old and faithful ones who swore solemn allegiance to him in life or in death,—refusing his best friends admittance under any condition, no wonder his unaccountable conduct gave rise to strange rumors,—but, if they reached his ears he heeded them not.

What mattered it to him, whose soul was torn with the cruelest emotions, what the censorious world thought or did.

If he paced the floor in the wildest despair for days and nights at a time, until at last exhausted nature forced him into a few brief hours of merciful forgetfulness,—it was his own affair, he told himself.

There was one room in the isolated gloomy mansion into which no one was ever allowed to enter—not even the servants. The silken curtains were kept carefully drawn night and day; the door had been securely fastened and the key thrown away. When it was forced open

in after years, dust lay thick on the ebony book-cases, the velvet chairs and mouldering green carpet.

Several costly paintings hung here and there about the apartment, and those who entered, noticed that *one of them was turned with its face toward the wall*,—righting it, they found it was the portrait of a young and marvellously beautiful woman.

The peculiarly curious event which had changed the current of three lives, happened in this way:—

One stormy night in August, several months previous to the opening of our story, Frederick Esmond, the subject of this narrative, who was then at the head of the well-known safe and lock company on Oxford Street, London, sat alone in his office busy over the firm's books.

He was so engrossed with his work, that he had not heeded the flight of time until the clock from an adjacent belfry rang out in slow measured strokes the hour of ten.

"By George!" exclaims Esmond, starting up with a low incredulous whistle and closing the ledger with a bang—at the same time consulting his watch—"who would have imagined that it was that late:—time actually whirls by a fellow when he's busy;—wonder if it's raining,—it's been threatening hard enough all the evening."

As he speaks, a blazing flash of lightning mingled with a terrific crash of thunder, presages the coming of the terrible storm; but the wind howling and raging like a demon around the corner of the building, dashes no raindrops as yet, against the window-pane.

"It's going to be a devil of a night and dark as Hades," says Esmond, meditatively, twirling the ends of his thick blonde mustache—"Ten to one I'll not be fortunate enough to strike a hansom because I want one particularly, and—"

The sentence never was finished, for he hears a slight noise at the street-door,—the knob turns and it swings open.

"The night-watch going his rounds is attracted by the unusual sight of a light in the office at this hour," he thinks, smiling as he starts forward—but at the first step he draws back voluntarily, and an exclamation of astonishment falls from his lips.—

Before him, standing shrinkingly in the doorway, he

beheld a tall, slender young girl,—so marvellously lovely, Esmond asks himself if she is a vision or a reality, and her face from that moment lives in his memory on forever.

He sees in the first rapid glance he gives her, a fair, innocent, girlish face, a trifle too haughty perhaps, framed in a mass of dark curling hair, half revealed, half concealed by the hood of the long cloak she wore,—but that which caught and held his attention curiously riveted was the pair of large dark eyes strangely brilliant, and dilated much like a frightened child's, which he fancied glanced over his head rather than at him.

He has always prided himself on his ability to read pretty accurately the character of people whom he met—from the expression of their faces; here was one whose expression,—or rather the lack of it, puzzled him exceedingly and impressed him strangely, but withal he was struck by its beauty.

"What can I do for you, Miss?" asks Esmond with a low bow, glancing hopelessly as he speaks over to his stylish new coat on the rack—the thought passing through his mind that he would have looked a thousand per cent. better if he had it on, and to make matters worse he had thrust his collar in his desk scarcely ten minutes before.

"Confound it," he muttered, "I never looked so badly in all my life, and before such a deucedly charming girl too."

Then he rallied his scattered senses, remembering she had not as yet, stated the object of her visit.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Miss?" he repeated.

The great dark eyes glanced around at the massive iron safes that lined the walls and stood about the room, and a peculiar expression flitted over her face.

"I must get the safe open for my uncle at once," she faltered, in a voice so musical it set the young man's heart to throbbing—"he has forgotten the combination."

Esmond looked at the young girl aghast.

"My dear young lady," he responded, as soon as he was sufficiently recovered from his astonishment to reply, "I will take great pleasure in attending to the matter, the first thing in the morning if you will leave your address, as for attending to it *to-night*—it is practically impossible; the men we have here for such work have gone home. It

is by the merest chance I am here to-night and you find the place open."

She clasped her little hands together with a gesture of entreaty, and with a glance from those strange, dark, fathomless eyes that few men could have resisted, she repeated in a low, faint voice, as though laboring under intense, suppressed excitement:—

"Oh the safe *must* be opened—at once."

That settled the matter; Esmond would have gone through fire and water for just such another glance from those dark starry eyes.

"It is really an unheard-of procedure at this hour," he stammered, blushing deeply, "but if it is such a matter of great importance, and it will be of any benefit to you, I place myself at your service, Miss." Nothing save the rare beauty of that face could have influenced him *against his better judgment* to comply with so strange a request. He could not distinguish her low murmured reply.

In a moment he had gathered the necessary implements together, smiling amusedly the while, as he wondered what his friends would think if they knew that he, Frederick Esmond, the wealthy owner of the widely-known safe and lock factory—with an income of £50,000 per annum,—was thanking fate for the opportunity that would permit him to step into the place of one of his workmen, to toil for long hours at the opening of a safe, merely to gratify a young and exceedingly lovely girl.

"I am ready," said Esmond, shortly,—still she hesitated. "Ah, she is waiting for me to call a cab," he thought, and very gallantly he suggested so doing, but to his great surprise she turned and walked hastily down the street.

"Great Heaven, have I offended the young lady?" he thought, in alarm,—profuse in his apologies as he gained her side.

"The storm will be upon us so soon," he explained, "that I believed it the wisest course to pursue."

She did not deign to answer him.

"If she could not have trusted me sufficiently to ride with me why did she come for me?" he thought, considerably nettled by her peculiar conduct. The expression of her face struck him now as being,—well—uncanny. As

she hurried along, she seemed to have entirely forgotten his presence—to ignore him completely, and he was not used to being slighted. This was quite a new order of things for Esmond; he felt piqued,—but the situation was certainly novel—and—romantic.

She stopped short at length before an imposing mansion in Hyde Park, swiftly ascended the marble steps, pushing open the door, which, strangely enough, was ajar. though the light in the lower corridor was extinguished.

Passing quickly up the broad stairway which was faintly illumined by a light from above, and entered a room toward the right; Esmond following.

It was a magnificent apartment as he saw it in the soft glow of the lamp light—luxurious in its every appointment. In an alcove revealed by the crimson velvet portières, which were looped back by gilded chains, he saw the safe, which he noticed was his own make. It bore upon it the name of the well known banker, John Middleton.

"This is the safe, I presume," said Esmond, rather resenting being so completely ignored.

She passed him, walking hurriedly up to the safe and knelt before it murmuring, "Yes,—the safe must be opened," rose abruptly and quitted the room without so much as a glance at Esmond.

"The oddest young girl I ever came across;" was his mental comment, "she mystifies me completely; her manner is most unnatural—constrained." But the next instant he lost sight of this in ruminating over the wonderful beauty of her face.

An hour passed; Esmond noted with chagrin that she did not return to the room to watch the operation of opening the safe.

This was in accordance with the proprieties of course—she would not sit there alone with him.

At length Esmond laid down his implements with a sigh of relief, the tiresome task was ended—the safe door stood open. In one of the compartments, in plain view, he noticed several stacks of bank-notes; the topmost bill on each stack of large denomination.

Esmond sat down, thinking the young lady or some member of the household must put in an appearance shortly, but in this, much to his surprise, he was mistaken.

"It is fortunate that I accepted this mission instead of sending one of my men," he soliloquized;—"they are honest, to be sure, but this is a temptation to become dishonest such as they would never meet with again in a lifetime."

Esmond waited a full hour, but no one relieved him by entering the room—then it flashed upon him that in all probability they were waiting impatiently for him to depart, which he lost no time in doing, drawing the safe door partially to and closing the door of the room, also the street door, carefully after him.

It was raining hard when he reached the street and he hailed the first passing cab. Was it only his fancy, or did he hear a stifled cry from an upper window of the house he had just quitted, as he rode away?

"Such a curious adventure," muttered Esmond, smiling as he looked at the white, shapely blistered hands that had wielded the steel drill and file for two long hours, "and all to please an unreasonable whim of a beautiful young girl, too coldly proud to look into my face or answer my questions—but looked instead into vacancy over my head."

All that night the lovely face with its dark, bright, eyes floated before Esmond's mental vision.

It was late when he reached his office the next morning; the secretary, foreman, and a group of men were discussing an item in the morning paper as he entered.

"What seems to be the commotion?" said Esmond, nodding pleasantly.

"A great robbery that occurred last night, sir, in the home of Banker Middleton in Hyde Park. A safe,—one of our make, by the way—was opened and an immense sum of money which he had been too late to send to the bank was taken. The safe appears to have been opened by a most skilful and daring cracksman, who seems familiar with the peculiarity of our lock," said the secretary, continuing,—

"The banker was found dead, lying in a pool of blood close by the safe, and as near as I can make it out he must have surprised the robber in opening the safe and got shot down,—I haven't finished the article, yet, sir."

Esmond sunk down with a gasp of horror on the nearest seat,—his face flushing and paling—the veins stand-

ing out like whip-cords on his face and neck. It seemed to him he was stifling,—choking.—He rose abruptly and left the office with unsteady steps.

"My God!" he cried, hoarsely, when he had gained the street—"*Robbery!—murder!* And *I* have been the dupe—the tool to further this most infamous scheme. There is but one course to pursue," he ruminated, his face pale as death, "and that is to go before the Police Inspector at once and make a clean breast of the whole affair,—surely no man ever yet had such a strange story to relate."

Then his mind reverted to the young girl who had led him into this unenviable predicament. It was clearly his duty to bring her to justice,—point her out to the minions of the law.

It was a great shock to him that she, with the face of an angel, was base at heart. Of course she was some outsider, who, knowing in some way of the money placed that night in the banker's safe, had devised this daring and most ingenious manner of obtaining it.

A few moments of rapid walking brought him to the Inspector's office. He paused a moment, with his foot on the stone steps.

Then commenced a strange war of contending emotions in his heart between duty, and an unaccountable, morbid desire to screen this girl even in the face of this atrocious crime.

It would be absurd to say that he had fallen in love with this girl whom he had seen only for a few moments, he told himself,—and yet he could not account for the fascination she had for him. He wished he could doubt the evidence of his own knowledge. Should he solve the great mystery that had startled all London, or remain silent and let her go free—a wicked freedom at best? Surely she must expect that he would do this—or did she believe for his own sake he dare not reveal his knowledge of the affair.

For himself, Frederick Esmond had no fears, his own excellent reputation would sustain him,—he stood irresolute a moment, thinking of *her*, knowing that he held the fate of this beautiful girl in his hands to decide.

CHAPTER II.

THE BANKER'S NIECE.

THE DOOR OPENED SUDDENLY, AND HE SAW A YOUNG AND LOVELY GIRL STANDING HESITATINGLY ON THE THRESHOLD.

IN that moment of hesitation, the matter was adjusted by a strange stroke of destiny:—a Mr. Rutherford, a Scotland Yard detective, who knew the well-known safe manufacturer by sight, came hurriedly up to him.

"Mr. Esmond, I believe," he said, raising his hat,—"You are the very person, sir, whom I wished to see," he said, "I have been detailed to work up a very singular case, you can give me a few points of valuable information if you will. A safe was broken into last night—one of your make, by the way—and in a skilful and most adroit manner. No doubt you have read of it in this morning's paper?"

Esmond nodded; he could not trust himself to speak.

"I am on my way to make an examination of the safe, now," said Mr. Rutherford, "and if I can get one of your men to accompany me, and explain the working of that peculiar lock, I shall be greatly obliged."

Esmond caught at the suggestion and the opportunity thus offered him to re-enter the banker's house.

"*I* will go with you," he said, abruptly.

"Now?" asked Rutherford.

"As well now as at any other time," responded Esmond, and entering a *coupé*, together they started out for the gloomy mansion in Hyde Park.

One of the servants admitted them, and Esmond followed his guide through the lower corridor and up the broad stairway toward the room to the right which he remembered so well, and a flush of indignation mantled his face as it occurred to him again how neatly he had been duped by the girl with the angel face. Of course she was some outsider who had gained in some way a

knowledge of the affairs transpiring in the banker's household. It was certainly an embarrassing position for Esmond—to explain accurately just how that lock had been forced.

"From what I can gather, the burglar took his own time about the affair," said Rutherford eyeing the safe critically. The—burglar! How the words smote Esmond's ear; he almost dropped the tools he held in his hand. He hesitated—the resolve came to him to make a clean breast of the whole singular affair there and then when fate again turned the tide of his future,—the door suddenly opened, and the identical young girl who had come to Esmond the evening before, stepped into the room.

"Miss Middleton!" exclaimed the detective, starting forward and saluting the young lady with the greatest respect.

"You are Mr. Rutherford, the detective," she said, in a clear, girlish voice. "I am glad you have come—I hope so much, sir, that you will succeed in unravelling the deep mystery surrounding the opening of the safe and the robbery."

Esmond had started to his feet, eyeing her keenly and with the most intense amazement in his face.

Miss Middleton!—Great Heaven! the banker's own niece! He was greatly shocked at this unlooked-for and astounding development. This was the same young girl, he was convinced beyond all question of doubt on this point, but yet—there was an indescribable change about her which puzzled him. The languor, the dreamy calm, was gone from her face; the expression of the eyes was different. *He could not probe the mystery of the sudden change.*

Her eyes must soon turn upon himself, of course, the recognition would be instantaneous; what would happen then?

Even as the thought flashed through his mind, Rutherford turned to him saying—"Miss Middleton—Mr. Esmond, proprietor of the safe and lock works, Oxford Street."

The lovely dark eyes turned full upon him.

It was a critical moment to Esmond. She did not start as his name was mentioned, or his keen searching gaze met hers, as he had expected; not even the slightest

tremor was visible in the face turned toward him so calmly.

With an easy grace and innocence of demeanor that fairly staggered Esmond, the young lady acknowledged the introduction, bestowing upon him scarcely more than a passing glance, then turned to Rutherford again.

"Does she imagine,—*can* she imagine that I do not remember her," he thought, in angry impatience; yet even in that moment the girl's wonderful beauty seemed to fascinate him afresh in spite of all.

"Would to Heaven I had never entered this house," he thought; yet, with a revulsion of feeling he was thankful that *he* and not another, held this startling adventure, which could wreck this young girl's future with one word from his lips.

With a start he recalled his wandering thoughts sufficiently to listen to the conversation that was taking place between his companion and the young lady.

"Will you kindly tell us, if you can, Miss Middleton," —Rutherford was saying, "how much money the safe contained? you were conversant with your uncle's affairs I imagine. Can you tell me at what time Mr. Middleton retired last night—what he did upon finding the safe open and the money gone? One of the servants informed me you both entered the room together."

Miss Middleton sunk into the nearest chair, dropping her lovely face in her hands for a moment. When she raised it the long dark lashes lying on her cheeks were wet with tears.

"May I tell you in my own way?" she asked, timidly.

"Certainly," responded Rutherford, placing a seat for Esmond and taking one himself near the young lady.

"As you know," she began, slowly,—"Mr. Middleton was my uncle, and although he had lived at bitter enmity with my father for long years, when my parents died, his heart relented toward the penniless orphan they had left. He sent for me; I have lived here ever since."

"One question please, Miss Middleton," said Rutherford—"did the banker all these years lead you to suppose you were to be his heiress?"

"No—oh no," she answered, looking frankly up into her interlocutor's face. "He told me repeatedly that all of his wealth at his death should go to his nephew, Mr. Karl

Heathcliff; but he often declared that some day he would add a codicil to his will leaving this house in Hyde Park —but nothing more—to me."

"That was unfair, did you not think so?" asked Rutherford, studying the fair face before him critically.

"No, sir," she retorted spiritedly, "his wealth was his own to do with as he pleased. I had no right to expect anything. As it is, I could never have repaid him for his kindness to me."

And again Esmond saw the lovely dark eyes fill with tears.

"But about the money, Miss Middleton," said Rutherford, intent upon leading the subject to the all-important topic uppermost in his mind,—"can you give me any idea as to how much money the safe contained?"

"Upward of a hundred thousand pounds in Bank of England notes," she replied, slowly. "My uncle had turned everything save this house into cash, intending to make some great investment on the morrow."

"It was his custom to bank all moneys, was it not?" suggested Rutherford.

"Yes, sir," Miss Middleton answered, simply, adding,—"and to make the matter worse, that evening after placing the money in the safe, he forgot the combination of the lock and it bothered him greatly, as no one save himself knew it."

"And in the morning?" questioned Rutherford.

"My uncle and I entered this room together after breakfast. One glance at the safe—the door of which stood ajar, just as you see it now—and he cried out in a sharp, hoarse voice that sounded like nothing human:—

"'Look, Irene! Great God! some one has broken open the safe.'

"In an instant he was kneeling beside it crying out:—

"'*All I have in the world has been stolen*, Irene!'"

Esmond turned pale as death as he listened; cold beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He saw the point now; the whole burden of this most atrocious robbery would be thrown upon him if he breathed one word of what had transpired.

And yet—oh, strange, inconsistent human heart—he would have suffered for it, if it would have saved *her*.

The innocence in the dark eyes as they turned often

from Rutherford to himself, fairly staggered him—bewildered him. He collected his scattered senses together and listened; his burning eyes never leaving that fair young face, as she continued her recital.

"My uncle—" Miss Middleton went on slowly, "had fallen on his face to the floor. I helped him to his feet, glancing at the safe as I did so, and saw to my great grief it was too true—the great stock of bank-notes I had seen him place in the safe and close the great iron door upon *were all gone!*

"'Oh uncle, dear uncle!' I cried, falling on my knees beside him—'let me comfort you.'

"He raised his white haggard face to mine, ah, me! how ghastly it looked in the morning sunlight.

"'Irene, my poor child,' he groaned; 'how shall I find words to tell you—to break to you what will follow—I am a ruined man; the toil of years has been swept away at one fatal blow, like the frailest bubble. Fate has raised its hand against me in my old age, Irene. I have worked all my life as few men have worked, child,—I have been thrifty and prudent,—now I have lost my all. I cannot work—I, who have had life easy so long, I could not bear to work for any one now in my old age, I have been my own master too many years,—I would choose death sooner.'

"The housekeeper and the servants, attracted by my cries, came into the room—then I knew no more—I swooned at their feet.

"When I recovered consciousness, long hours after, I learned that which nearly made my heart break with grief: In a moment of madness—at the first opportunity in which he found himself alone—he had shot himself," and as she concluded her recital, her tears flowed copiously.

"Is Mr. Heathcliff, the nephew, in London?" interrogated Rutherford, quietly.

"No," returned Miss Middleton, "but he has been telegraphed to, and we expect him here to-day."

Rutherford could see that this interview was a great strain upon the young lady's nerves, and wisely concluded, as he thanked her, to take his leave.

Glancing once toward Esmond he had noticed that his eyes were lingering on Miss Middleton's face with eager

admiration, and this somehow, did not quite please him.

As the two gentlemen quitted the room—Rutherford slightly in advance, Esmond turned back, saying rapidly in a whisper which could be heard only by Miss Middleton:

"*You recognize me as a matter of course;—but in the face of it all, I say to you—I will be your true friend; I cannot help it.*"

The next moment he was gone, leaving Miss Middleton staring after him quite dumbfounded—staring after him with wide-open puzzled eyes.

A little later she was sitting in the housekeeper's room, relating all that had just taken place to Mrs. Grey.

"The gentleman who accompanied the detective was so peculiar in his manner," she went on, musingly; "his eyes fairly burned like two scorching flames as they gazed into mine—and then, the words that he uttered as he bade me good morning I cannot begin to comprehend the meaning of:—'In the face of it all, I will be your true friend; I cannot help it.' Now what do you suppose he could mean by that, Mrs. Grey?"

"There is but this one meaning, my dear," said the housekeeper, laying her hand on the dark, bowed, curly head—"and that is:—although you are *not* the heiress people look for you to be, as Mr. Middleton's niece—you still have true friends despite that. The gentleman probably has an abrupt manner and a brusque way of saying things."

The young girl's face brightened, though tears stood in the great dark eyes.

"I shall always feel grateful to him for speaking so kindly to me," she said, simply; "for I have always heard when you lose your fortune you lose your friends—but the loss of friends and fortune is nothing to me compared to the great loss of losing uncle."

"This is a hard trial for you to pass through, my dear," said Mrs. Grey, "but you must face it bravely. I suppose your cousin, Mr. Heathcliff will be here by noon. He will take all the responsibility off your mind."

"Heaven help the child," the housekeeper murmured, her eyes dim with tears, as Irene walked away; "she is so young to face the world—alone."

At that moment one of the servants entered with a dis-

patch. Mrs. Grey tore open the envelopè and glanced hurriedly at the message. It was from the late Mr. Middleton's nephew, and was as follows:

"To Mrs. Grey:
"Have just reached the city—am shocked to hear of the tragedy; "will be with you within an hour.
[Signed] "Karl Heathcliff."

Mrs. Grey shuddered, as she laid down the telegram—not with cold—for it was a warm August day. She always felt that strange, chilling sensation whenever she saw, or thought of Mr. Middleton's nephew.

She could never quite overcome the aversion she had taken to him a few months since—at first sight, when he had returned to visit his uncle after an absence of years, travelling abroad on the continent.

On that occasion, a little spaniel belonging to her, had bounded over the lawn, barking furiously, at the tall, dark, handsome stranger as he swung open the iron gate.

"Call the dog off!" he exclaimed, angrily, to the gardener, who stood near, but the dog wouldn't be called off—barking more furiously than ever at the unwelcome guest.

With a fierce muttered imprecation, ground out between his white teeth, he hurled the luckless spaniel to death with one blow from his polished boot-heel and passed haughtily up the paved walk.

From that moment, the housekeeper had cherished a secret dislike toward Mr. Karl Heathcliff. "He is not a man to be trusted," she told herself, and she very seldom changed her first impressions, which usually proved correct.

CHAPTER III.

ALONE IN THIS HARD CRUEL WORLD—HOMELESS AND PENNILESS.

ESMOND parted from the detective at the nearest corner. It would never do for this man to notice the suppressed excitement he was laboring under, and which he was doing his best to control.

When he reached his office again, the old secretary looked at him in alarm.

"Are you sure you are quite well, sir?" he asked, anxiously; "your face flushes and pales and your eyes have a very feverish look in them."

"Nonsense, of course I am well," he answered, impatiently, adding,—"Where is that paper you were reading, when I left the office? I should like to look it over."

"I beg your pardon, sir," began the secretary, "but if you wish to read about the robbery that occurred last night, I would suggest to you to glance over the *Times;* here is one of the extra's, giving a more explicit account of the affair. It is thought now by one of the detectives who took a survey of the premises, and the body of the banker just as it lay upon discovery, *that he was murdered* instead of having committed suicide, and that the person who opened the safe and took the money did the deed; there is strong circumstantial evidence on that point."

It was a great relief to Esmond that the secretary was called from the office at that moment.

"Am I mad, or do I dream?" he groaned, crushing the paper in his hand, starting up from his chair, and pacing the room hurriedly; "the web seems to tighten around me; yet, I would face the whole thing if it were not for—*her.*"

No man in the world had a greater horror of crime than he, yet,—could he be the one to betray this girl—no matter what her sin might be, for he realized that he loved

her as he had never loved a woman before and should never love another woman again,—though in the face of all the circumstances he almost cursed himself for it,—but alas—to love or not to love, is beyond the control of mortals.—Love goes where God listeth, and he was destined to love her madly, hopelessly, to the bitter end. And in that moment he thought of the lines:

"Oh what was love made for if 'tis not the same,
Through joy and through torment, through glory and shame?
I know not, I care not, if guilt 's in the heart;
I know that I love thee whatever thou art,
Through the furnace, unshrinking, thy steps I'll pursue,
And shield thee, and save thee, or perish there too.

It seemed cruel to charge Irene Middleton with this tragedy—even *knowing all.*

"I would give every penny of my fortune for the knowledge that she is innocent," he groaned, burying his face in his hands. He was trying to convince his own heart that she *was*, even against his better judgment.

He knew that he held her fate in his hands—yet he would as soon have thought of plunging a dagger into his own heart as of betraying her.

Mighty, unconquerable love, had gained in the conflict, and duty was vanquished. And yet, he told himself,—"never was an honorable man placed in such a predicament."

"There is but one way to cure myself of this mad passion, and that is, to leave London at once," he concluded,—and without trusting himself to look at that beautiful face again.

It was quite a surprise to the old secretary when he announced his decision.

He watched Esmond, as he stepped into a hansom cab, which stood before the door, shaking his gray head dubiously.

"I cannot make out what is coming over him of late," he muttered,—"he acts like a man demented."

Esmond left London by the next out-going express—caring little whither he went; no place was new to him. He visited France, Italy, and sunny Spain, where the olive and the myrtle ripen luxuriantly under the golden *sunshine.*

He journeyed to Savoy, that marvellous valley which lies under the boulders of Mont Blanc; where the sturdy roses sway with the wind at the edge of the frowning glaciers. He visited the monastery of St. Bernard. His one idea being constant motion would bring him forgetfulness; but go where he would, do what he might, the memory of that fair, girlish face, with its great dark innocent eyes, was ever before him. It was evident he could not escape from his thoughts and they were with *her* waking or sleeping.

He had adhered strictly to his resolution that he would read no London paper—he would know nothing about the affair—then this great lesson that he had set himself to learn, to forget, might be more readily accomplished in time.

At the end of the sixth week a telegram reached him summoning him back to London on important business connected with the company. There was nothing for it but to return at once.

Human nature is strangely erratic; as Esmond neared the great smoky city, his one thought was—that each mile brought him nearer Irene Middleton—he would soon see her.

For the first time since his enforced exile, he bought a London paper, but his heart was too full of conflicting emotions to put his mind on reading just then.

Where was she now? he wondered. Was she living in dread from day to day, lest he—the only person who knew her secret—would expose her?

He had done his utmost to despise her, and he had ended by loving her more desperately than ever. He would woo and win her in spite of all, if he could; for life would be nothing to him—without her.

Esmond opened the paper mechanically, but the first words that met his eye chained his attention and held him spell-bound. His face paled and a gasp of dismay broke from his lips as he read the startling headlines of a two-column article.

The caption was briefly as follows :—

The Middleton Safe Robbery Cleared at Last.—A Startling Revelation! —The Strangest Case in the Annals of London's History.—The Guilty Party Brought to Justice Through a Most Peculiar Circumstance.

The paper almost fell from the strong, white hand that clutched it. The headlines seemed to stand out in letters of fire, and the fine print which followed it to waver and whirl before his eyes.

Ere we explain the strange story the *Pall Mall Gazette* disclosed, we must return to the cause that led to it, and this brings us back to the eventful day in which the household of the late Banker Middleton were grouped together in the drawing-room awaiting the arrival of Mr. Karl Heathcliff, the nephew, who seemed rather slow in coming.

At length they heard the sound of carriage wheels, and a moment later, the footman announced—

"Mr. Heathcliff."

And Mr. Middleton's nephew entered the room. He paused a moment on the threshold, and as he so stands, he is an object well worth studying; tall, well made, with a fine erect figure and easy bearing that would attract attention even among a crowd of men.

His face is handsome but not good; the eyes are dark and piercing; the brows are arched and thick, but the mouth, the key to the whole face, is a bad one; but it is not visible, being concealed by a thick, curling, dark mustache.

It is the face of a man who lives entirely for himself; who knows no restraint, who consults his own inclinations, and who would sacrifice every one and everything to himself.

There is but one tender spot in his nature, and that is his love for Irene Middleton; and, though he feels assured that the girl positively dislikes him, he does not despair of winning her at last.

He nods carelessly to Mrs. Grey, the housekeeper, glances impatiently at the group of weeping servants clustered about the door of their late master's room, then calls abruptly for Miss Middleton.

"She is in her room, sir," the housekeeper answered, "quite sick with a headache; she has done nothing but walk the floor and weep ever since master died."

Heathcliff frowned but made no comment.

During the three days that followed, Heathcliff saw very little of Irene. It was plainly apparent to him that she avoided him on every possible occasion, but he

seemed to take no notice of the girl's aversion outwardly, but inwardly he resented it fiercely.

The day following the funeral, Irene, Mr. Heathcliff, Mrs. Grey, and a few of the family servants were called together by Lawyer Marsh to hear the reading of Mr. Middleton's will.

Irene, robed in heavy black, sat next the lawyer—her fair young face bent on her hands, a knot of dark ribbon fastening back her dark, heavy curls.

Karl Heathcliff sat opposite her, striving to maintain a careless expression, as he moved restlessly about in his seat.

The banker, John Middleton, had always been recognized as one of the most eccentric of men; therefore it was not to be wondered at that his will should have the same characteristic. Yet every one united in saying it was the most peculiar, cruel, as well as the most unjust will ever brought to light.

The will was dated several months back, and Lawyer Marsh's partner, who had drawn it up, had since passed away. At this time the banker was a wealthy man.

The document, after directing that a few hundred pounds be divided amongst the old-time family servants read:—"And to my niece Irene, I bequeath my villa in Hyde Park, upon one condition, and that is, that Irene shall marry my nephew Karl Heathcliff, not later than six months after my demise, at farthest. This is the earnest request of an uncle who has his niece's welfare at heart. Should Irene refuse to comply with this condition, she is to receive but one pound sterling from my estate, and no more; said property in Hyde Park, at the expiration of the stipulated six months, to pass into the possession of my nephew, Karl Heathcliff. The remainder of my estate, both real and personal, I give, bequeath and devise to Karl Heathcliff, unconditionally.

"In conclusion, I urge the speedy consummation of said marriage. I request no mourning worn for me a fortnight after my demise; no exhibition of grief by closing the house and eschewing society—I wish everything to follow in its usual routine."

The will appointed the deceased lawyer, Lawyer Marsh and Karl Heathcliff as executors.

Not a word was spoken during the entire reading of

the will;—at its close Irene rose to her feet with a low cry, her hands clasped, gazing fixedly at the lawyer. Her face was pale as death, and there was a look of horror and dismay in the great, dark expanded eyes.

Poor girl, she never realized in that moment that she was disinherited—cut off with but a paltry pound—hurled in a single hour from the height of influence and wealth to face the world as best she might.

She did not realize this—God help her—she only realized that her uncle had solemnly requested her to marry a man she could never love; whom, on the contrary, she quite disliked.

She looked at Heathcliff with a low, shuddering cry,—took one step forward to quit the room, and fell at the old lawyer's feet in a deep swoon.

For once in his life Heathcliff had the grace not to intrude his presence too soon on the grief-stricken girl.

To Mrs. Grey he left the delicate task of unfolding to Irene by degrees, the truth that this home which she had considered hers so long was hers no longer, unless she accepted him with it.

On the day following the reading of the will, Mrs. Grey had gone to Irene's apartment for the purpose of determining what Irene proposed to do under the existing circumstances. She found her, lying with tear-stained face, on the sofa.

"Irene," she said, crossing the room and laying her kindly hands on the bowed, curly head, "I have come in to have a quiet talk with you. Don't lie there and sob, my dear; sit up and attend to what I have to say to you. The time has now come when you must listen."

Irene meekly obeyed.

For a moment the old housekeeper scarcely knew how to begin; she plunged into the heart of it awkwardly enough.

"Banker Middleton's will was a most unexpected turn of affairs," she said, slowly, as she seated herself. "It seems hard to bring you to a full realization of the situation, but, my dear, I feel it my duty to show you the very delicate position in which you will be placed in a very few days."

The dark, curly head was raised from the white hand

that supported it, and the wistful eyes looked at her wonderingly.

"Of course, you know," continued Mrs. Grey, "that the banker's death necessitates many changes—great changes."

"I have—have not thought," faltered Irene, with a sob.

"The time has come, Irene, when you must leave off crying and think. I leave the villa to-morrow, Irene; all the servants about the place have been dismissed, and—well to break into the plain truth—you, a young and unmarried girl, do not expect to remain here alone—in the home of a bachelor. It would be highly improper; in short, not to be thought of, you see, child."

CHAPTER IV.

MY HEART IS EMPTY—AND MY LIFE IS LONELY.

THE startled look in Irene Middleton's large dark eyes, showed Mrs. Grey the consciousness of the bitter truth was slowly coming to the girl in its full force.

She was beginning to realize the terrible reality—the home which she had always looked upon as hers was hers no longer.—She was living at that moment on the charity of Mr. Heathcliff, and was face to face with the world, being wholly unprovided for.

"Now," questioned Mrs. Grey, sympathetically, "what do you propose to do, Irene?"

"To do?" repeated the girl, vaguely.

"Yes, to do," answered the housekeeper, pitying Irene from the bottom of her heart. She was not surprised to see the girl shrink back, and a look of dismay deepen in the dark eyes.

"You are all alone in the world, save for Mr. Heathcliff," she pursued, "and now the question, my dear child, is,—do you think you will marry him, or go out into the world. Weigh the chances carefully, Irene; to whom could you go? On one side, a husband and a home are offered you—on the other, the chances of success of a penniless girl, poor and proud, tossed mercilessly by each wave of circumstance, buffeted about, a prey to poverty and despair,—alone—friendless! Those who have courted and fawned around Banker Middleton's prospective heiress in her prosperity, would pass her by in adversity with a scornful, haughty stare."

"Oh, Mrs. Grey, what would you do if you were in my place?" sobbed Irene, clinging to her and looking up into her face, piteously. "I am so young, I have never had one thought of such a thing as marrying anyone!"

"That is a matter in which you should follow the dictates of your own judgment."

"Ought there not to be a little—love—between those who marry?" asked the girl, timidly; a wave of color crossing the whiteness of her face as she uttered the words, bashfully.

"Of course there *should* be," admitted Mrs. Grey.

"I have heard that it was a sin to marry without it."

"My dear Irene, you express yourself so oddly," said the housekeeper,—"some of the happiest of marriages have been when people have learned to love each other after marriage."

"I had such a different idea of it," said Irene, slowly, "I thought it took place when two souls were attracted insensibly toward each other. What happens if the wrong souls ever go together?" she asked, suddenly.

Mrs. Grey was startled.

"My dear Irene," she said, "what odd notions you have, I do not know how to answer you."

"I should think the wrong souls would part, and each go to the right one—that must be it," she said, musingly.

Mrs. Grey held up her hands with a gesture of amazement.

"Was there ever a young girl with such peculiar thoughts. Did you ever see any one whom you think you would have cared for, more than Mr. Heathcliff, Irene?" she asked, anxiously.

A vision of a noble face—with deep, earnest blue eyes, and a deep voice saying:—"*In the face of it all, I will be your true friend; I cannot help it,*"—recurred to Irene, but she answered proudly—"No."

The face of the young man who had uttered those words had lingered often in her thoughts, and there had come to her the vague thought, should she ever meet him again?

"Take until to-morrow to think over what I have said, Irene," said Mrs. Grey, rising—"but remember this, as you consider the matter, your uncle wished for this marriage."

For an hour or more after Mrs. Grey had left her, Irene paced the floor in deep thought.

"I will go out into the air," she murmured, "perhaps I can think better there, what is best to be done."

She had barely reached the avenue of trees that led to the park ere she heard rapid, familiar footsteps behind

her; and, glancing around, she saw Mr. Heathcliff swiftly approaching.

He lifted his hat with the eager grace characteristic of him; but, for the first time, Irene noticed that he seemed nervous—greatly agitated. His face was pale and his eyes restless; even the tone of his voice sounded strangely hoarse and unnatural, as he addressed her.

"I am glad to have met you, Irene," he said, "I sent for you a little while since at the house and when they told me that you were not in, I was greatly perturbed; I wanted to see you at once, and on a very important subject."

"Well, here I am," said the girl, raising her clear, dark eyes to his,—"what do you want me for, Mr. Heathcliff?"

"I want to tell you that I am called suddenly away from London, Irene," he answered, "I must catch the next outgoing train." Here he hesitated, and glanced uneasily at his companion. "My return is *very* uncertain, Irene," he went on, "I may be gone long years—perhaps forever. Therefore I am obliged to ask you to decide here and now, if you will be my wife." He added, "It is abrupt, I realize; but I am forced to know the issue *now*. Circumstances alter cases very materially. I am obliged to have my answer without delay."

"I—I—could not make up my mind so soon," said Irene, piteously, "indeed I cannot."

"Do not think me harsh or imperative, if I say you *must*, Irene," he said firmly; "this matter will brook no delay."

"Could I not write you, in a little while, what my answer will be?" she asked, thoughtfully.

"It is now or never, Irene," he answered; "even now we are wasting precious moments. I do not attempt to coerce you, I only add my entreaties to your uncle's. I love you, Irene, and have loved you from the first moment I saw you. My heart was empty and my life was lonely. I should not have remained in London—there are a thousand reasons why I should have been far away—the hope of winning you yet kept me here."

"Would you want me to marry you, knowing I do not care for you?" she asked, proudly.

"It is my only chance of winning and I seize the op-

portunity," he answered. "I will reward you with a life of devotion. I will make you the happiest of women, if love and wealth can accomplish it. Our uncle desired this marriage with his whole heart; for his sake I ask you to grant his last request."

He well knew the girl's intense love for the dead banker; that was the most powerful argument he could use, to gain her consent. She was only eighteen—with as little knowledge of the great world around her as a dreaming child of eight. Is it to be wondered at, that at length he persuaded her to accept him?—even though in the same breath she told him she did not love him.

"Love will come in time," he answered—"I will give my whole life to the winning of you."

"I am sure that you will not succeed," she said,—"I tell you very frankly, I consent, because I cannot disobey the last request of my uncle—hard though it be."

He looked at her, she was so royally beautiful in her utter indifference to him, so much more worth winning than any other woman in her most complaisant mood, that Heathcliff felt that he could have given his life for that victory.

He bent his dark, handsome head over the little hand he held; he looked at the beautiful face, but dared not touch it with his lips, held back by her quiet cold politeness, and the knowledge that he had her love to win, therefore he must not be too precipitately demonstrative.

Though his heart was beating wildly with triumph, he merely said,—"Thank you, Irene; you have made me one of the happiest of men. The ceremony must be performed immediately; we will go to the nearest rectory. You shall not walk; I will call a hansom cab," he said, placing her on one of the park seats close by the entrance. "Wait for me here, Irene, I shall be but a few moments."

She watched him as he walked away. He was tall, handsome, with a well proportioned figure; and she wondered, vaguely, if she ever would like him—she thought not. How strange it was within the hour she was to be his wife; yes, this would be her wedding-day. Like all young and romantic girls, she had had day-dreams of what her wedding-day would be like, and of the bridegroom who would come to claim her. How widely different the reality was. Why should her heart sink as she

looked at the sunshine and listened to the birds? Why did a faint shuddering cry escape her pale lips? She did not realize that it was the cry of a young heart sick and faint with its own forebodings—the prophetic cry of a soul seized for the first time with unutterable dread—and yet, no one could wonder at it, for marriage is a very solemn thing to a young girl.

Heathcliff walked rapidly toward the nearest cab-stand. He was triumphant; he had barely hoped for so great a success. Irene was so beautiful, so haughty, that he had hardly dared to hope that she would listen to him. There was that in the dark, checkered life of Karl Heathcliff, which should have made him pause and consider well, ere he linked the life of this bright young girl with his. He thought of her high spirit, her noble nature, and wondered how she would endure the life that lay before her; he wondered whether in time to come, she would dislike him, hate him—loathe him. He wondered over all these things; yet the idea of sparing her, of saving her was beyond him. He was not capable of the sacrifice.

As he walked hurriedly down the street, once or twice he gave a quick start, glancing uneasily about him.

"The conviction has haunted me all day long that I am watched by unseen eyes," he muttered,—"I have been a fool to remain here as long as I have."

Suddenly a hand fell on his shoulder. Heathcliff started back with a low-breathed imprecation, but an expression of relief spread over his face as he saw who it was who had accosted him—and he muttered—"It's only Lennox."

The young man standing before Heathcliff was a very fair specimen of a good-natured young Englishman,—too good-natured, in fact, for his own welfare.

"Ha, 'Eathcliff," he cried, holding out a slender, white hand; "the very man h' I wanted to see. 'Aven't seen you for a fortnight; my 'orse won on the Derby but h' I lost it h'all the same night; h' I expected you round but you didn't show up. H'Im sorry to seem pressing, but h' I—ah! h' I say, 'Eathcliff, h' I must 'ave that money you owe me, by to-night, you know."

"Hush, not a word of that here, Lennox, you'll ruin me," said Heathcliff, glancing hurriedly about him.

"Ruin you; that's pretty good," cries the young Eng-

lishman, going off into a peal of uproarous laughter; "egad, h' I thought you were ruined h'aready, 'Eathcliff, h'I believe h'onestly, the h'only h'object belonging to the 'Eathcliff estate which remains h'unmortgaged—is yourself."

"It is equally sure that no one would lend money on me," returned Heathcliff. "Come into his *café*," he added, knowing the other's particular weakness; and taking this means of ridding himself of him, "and we will have a champagne together."

"No," says Lennox, drawing back, "h' I've sworn h'off to please my mother h'and sisters; h'I've just got h'over a week's sickness the result h'of h'our last champagne together; h'I vowed h'if h'I pulled through that, h'I'd cry quits."

"Nonsense," retorted Heathcliff, impatiently, quoting, with a sneer on his face which by no means improved its expression :—

> "When the devil got sick, the devil a monk would be,
> When the devil got well, the devil a monk was he."

"That would be more like you, Lennox,—eh?" taking him by the arm, notwithstanding the poor fellow's entreaties, Heathcliff soon had him in the *café*. A few minutes more, and despite all Lennox's resolutions, he was unable to leave it for the present.

"I'll see you later, my dear boy," said Heathcliff, turning him over to a party of congenial friends they found there.

"He is disposed of," he muttered, as he gained the street—"a soft-brained fool, that, who hasn't the stamina to stick to it when he does say 'no.'"

"I have already lost ten minutes," he soliloquized. "Irene will wonder what detains me."

She was still sitting on the rustic seat where he had left her when he drove hurriedly up to the park entrance.

"Has the time seemed long to you, Irene?" he asked, as he handed her into the carriage.

"No," she answered simply; "I—was so absorbed in thought, I quite forgot you."

"That is not very complimentary," he remarked, quickly.

He did not tell her that, anticipating her consent, he

had already taken out a special license and engaged the services of the rector, who was waiting even at that moment to receive them.

As they crossed the portal of the old church, she was startled by a sudden cry from his lips—by the sudden pallor of his face. "Why, Irene," he cried, "do you know that you are attired in black crape? I am not superstitious, but it frightens me. Who ever heard of a bride coming to the altar in black crape?"

"You forget the circumstances of this marriage," replied the girl; "you insisted upon an immediate marriage in order to catch the outgoing train which leaves London within the hour. I could make no preparations. You were content to take me just as I am, you said. I had not thought about the color of my dress."

He was not, as he said—a superstitious man—but the idea of his bride standing at the altar beside him robed in black crape, filled him with dismay.

CHAPTER V.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER HAD SHE DIED AT THE ALTAR—WITH HER MARRIAGE VOWS FRESH ON HER LIPS—THAN LIVED TO HAVE FACED THE DARK FUTURE.

How gloomy the interior of the dim old church seemed to Irene—with its stained glass windows, marvels of richness and color, with figures of saints upon them with palm branches and golden crowns.

The white-haired minister looked at the couple he was to wed as they advanced. How lovely the bride elect was, and how strangely ill at ease the handsome bridegroom appeared. "It is all right, I suppose," he thought.

For the sake of the fair, young face, he asked few questions. Yes, it was perfectly, legally right—no business of his. Then he opened his book. For a moment there was deep silence, broken only by the song of the birds outside, and the rustling of the leaves stirred by the wind tapping the window pane.

Then slowly, solemnly, the words were spoken and the responses uttered that made this fair young girl Karl Heathcliff's wife.

They signed their names in the register in the vestry. The old minister touched the lovely, pale face, wishing her joy, and shook the bridegroom's hand, wishing him every happiness. "I have never seen a more beautiful young bride," he said, "always be kind and loyal to her."

Irene was startled at hearing the bells peal as they walked down the aisle together. Karl Heathcliff's face was flushed, Irene's was pale and frightened. It was the very solemnity of those words "Until death do ye part," that had startled her, she trembled as she thought of them—such solemn words—such terrible vows; she had never thought, never dreamed getting married was anything like this; all the people she had ever heard speak

of marriage did it with a light, careless laugh as though it were some great joke, and here it proved to be so terrible, so real that the memory of it would always alarm her.

"My wife!" whispered Heathcliff, handing her into the carriage. The sun was shining—the trees with their green foliage trembling in the summer breeze; the bells filled the air with sweet music; how well Irene remembered every detail of that scene in the dark days that followed.

"To the railway station, —— street," Heathcliff directed the driver; adding, "an extra pound if you make it within ten minutes."

Looking from the window of the carriage, he had seen a face in the crowded thoroughfare that made his own pale alarmingly and seemed for an instant to fascinate him.

"*He* here! It cannot be him," he muttered. "Good heavens, if it *should* be! And I—loitering here."

Irene had spoken to him, but his agitation was so great he had not even heard her.

The driver whipped up his horses and in less than ten minutes landed them at the railway-station, earning the extra pound. Then he was dismissed.

"We cannot leave in this summary fashion without letting Mrs. Grey know," Irene suggested here.

"When we reach the end of our journey we can telegraph her, explaining matters," he replied.

He did not think there was any use in telling her the truth just then—that he meant that no one should ever discover whither they had gone.

The railway station at this hour was always crowded. Heathcliff found a seat for Irene, murmuring as he bent over her,—

"You shall never regret this step, my darling."

Crossing over to the ticket office, he inquired in a low voice,—after glancing carefully and keenly at the group of men near him to learn whether or not he was particularly observed—"Can I get tickets here for Edinburgh?"

"No, sir," answers the agent; "get them at the Scotch mail route depot, three blocks down the street; wrong depot."

"How long will it be before the express starts?"

"In fifteen minutes, exactly; you'll be very lucky if you catch it, sir."

Heathcliff returns to Irene's side, hurriedly.

"We are at the wrong depot it seems," he said,—"I am sorry I dismissed that cabman so soon; I shall have to get another. Wait here until I return. It is just twelve o'clock now, Irene," he says, comparing his watch with the huge clock on the wall, "we will have bare time to make the train. I shall be back for you within three minutes."

"Had I not better go with you, Karl?" she suggested. He shook his head, with a smile, hurrying away.

As he reaches the doorway, a very dilapidated looking individual in a crushed hat and very muddy cutaway coat, his face so bespattered with mud, he was hardly recognizable, ran directly into Heathcliff's arms.

"'Scuse me,—'scuse me, sir," he hiccoughed, in a voice thick with wine.

"You had better look out where you are going to next time, fellow," retorted Heathcliff, angrily, brushing the dust from his coat sleeve and immaculate shirt front, with his silk handkerchief.

The "fellow" looks after Heathcliff, and attempts to utter a low whistle, but it is a failure; he is too utterly "gone" for that.

"W—why tha—thats 'Eathcliff, 'pon my—my—soul," he hiccoughs. "Guesh 'ee didn't rec—rec—nize me. No mat—ter—(hic)—'ees a mean fellah any'ow that 'Eathcliff.—So mean if 'ee lay in the gut—ter, h' I, wouldn' pick im up with a pitchfork."

At this juncture, Mr. Lennox—for it is he,—is taken in charge of by the railway officials, and hurried summarily from the waiting-room, though he protests he wishes to buy a ticket and go on that train, much to the amusement of the passengers; even Irene was diverted from her thoughts for a moment, in watching the amusing spectacle.

"Have I done right in allowing Karl to persuade me to marry him?" she wondered, vaguely, taking up the thread of her communings again. "I—oh Heaven forgive me, I am beginning to repent of it already. The very touch of his hand clasping mine always sends a cold chill through my heart; I cannot tell why."

She glances at the clock on the wall, and perceives with a start of dismay that fifteen minutes have elapsed.

"What can detain him?" she asks herself—"he was to return in three minutes."

Irene watches with dreamy eyes the throngs of people that come and go. The moments drag themselves wearily on, but much to her surprise Heathcliff does not return. Surely he could not have forgotten her, she thinks.

The clock on the wall marks the hour of one; fifteen minutes more pass, then another half, and with fascinated eyes she watches the hands of the great clock creep round to the hour of two. Time seems to fairly fly.

Should she wait longer or return home; she is so puzzled, so bewildered, by all that has transpired she cannot think clearly.

Once again, the irrepressible Lennox enters, this time carefully brushed off—and little the worse in appearance from the dizziness of two hours previous.

There is the usual pushing and scrambling to secure the necessary bit of pasteboard; and amidst the throng two unwieldy ladies, weighted down with innumerable bundles and boxes, make a rush for the door that leads to the trains, when it is thrown open.

"One at a time, if you please," shouts the official, but neither of the two ladies thinks of giving way to the other, in the struggle for supremacy to be first; each holding her parcels high in the air to escape the iron railings.

One small boy sets an example to the amused bystanders: he lowers his head from contact with the huge boxes and bundles, and scoots through the archway thus formed with a derisive shout of triumph.

Lennox watches the spectacle with a smothered titter.

"I'll bet on the one this way for a place," he says *sotto voce* to the official, "Lawd pity the poor devil, ah, 'as to pay for the other 'alf ho'f the seat with either h'of em' don't you know."

"You'd better get your ticket. sir, if you intend to go by this train," suggested the official.

Lennox made his way to the small window from which the ticket agent's face beamed out, with alacrity, that is, considering the dizziness of a head that seemed considerably too large for his hat.

Irene was by this time utterly oblivious to what was transpiring about her, her thoughts were so distracted.

"Oh Karl—Karl—what can detain you?" she sobbed under her breath. "I grow anxious, terrified—what can it mean?" The hands of the clock on the wall pointed to twenty minutes of three.

Lennox had been regarding the beautiful face of the young girl pacing so restlessly from window to window that he had almost forgotten the necessary bit of pasteboard.

"Ticket to Liverpool, my good fellah," he said, "what's the damage?"

"Train hasn't started; can't tell that yet," replied the agent. "Want a life insurance ticket, too, sir?—Insures against all accidents."

"No, my good fellah,—ticket to Liverpool; h'I'll take it straight," he cut in, laconically.

"Extra!—Extra!"—cried half a dozen news-boys, darting their heads through as many open windows and doors, singing out in a chorus the startling *dénouement:*—

"*Extra!—All about the capture of the most daring and expert robber in London! The startling arrest by a Scotland Yard detective—Extra!—Extra!*"

There is as usual a rush for the papers.

"'Ere lad—lets 'ave a copy," says Lennox, and he secures one.

His eyes begin to stare as he reads the headlines. The shock he sustains as he reads further on succeeds in completely restoring his rather dazed faculties.

"By George, now who'd 'ave thought it," he mutters under his breath, "who'd 'ave suspected *'im* h'of h'all h'other men. By George, now h'I'm astounded—h'I'll never get the fifty pound 'ee h'owes me now, that's sure, confound the fellah. Egad, 'ere's 'is picture, too."

At this juncture the train bell rings and Lennox flings down the paper on the nearest bench, making a bee-line for the now-moving train; everything else for the moment forgotten in the excitement of catching it.

The waiting-room is quite deserted now, and Irene paces the floor, fairly too bewildered to think.

"I cannot restrain my anxiety," she mutters,—"my heart almost stops beating with strange apprehension. How Karl will laugh at me when I tell him how frightened I have been."

The paper attracts her attention and she picks it up mechanically, telling herself she will look it over a few moments to pass the time away.

As she opens out the page the first words her eyes rest on are :—

"Capture of the most daring and expert robber, London has ever known. The mysterious Middleton Safe Robbery cleared at last. A correct portrait given below of the man, taken by our special artist who was present at the scene of the arrest. The desperate resistance of the officers—a full history of the remarkable crime"—

Irene stops short; her gaze has encountered the pictured face—her eyes dilate—she feels for an instant the cold chill of death creeping over her. She holds the paper off at arm's length, repeating the name that seems to stand out in letters of glaring fire beneath the picture —*Karl Heathcliff!*

She clutches the paper tightly in her hand; the floor and the ceiling seem to meet in the first forward step she takes. She tries to cry out, but the deep, awful, heart-rending cry dies away on her lips, making no sound. She throws up her white hands on one of which shines the wedding-ring the man whose pictured face stares up at her, placed there such a short while ago,—and falls in a deep swoon to the floor of the waiting-room. It would have been better had she died at the altar than lived to have faced the dark future.

Rough hands, but kind ones, hasten to lift the slight figure, and she is quickly given in charge of the matron who has charge of such cases.

It is by the merest chance that Irene happens to have one of her cards in her pocket—it saves her from being taken to the nearest hospital.

Her white right hand holds the paper clutched so tightly that they do not attempt to remove it,—a hansom is quickly called, the girl placed in it and in a very short time she is lying, unconscious still, upon her own white bed in her own room at the Middleton Villa.

Mrs. Grey, the housekeeper, had been greatly alarmed

over the girl's protracted absence, and more shocked still when she was brought home in a deadly swoon. She said:—

"The paper she holds in her hand is a key to the mystery—we purchased one of those extras a little while since ourselves, and found, to our intense joy and surprise, the Middleton Safe Robbery, with the mystery shrouding it, was cleared *at last* in those columns. No wonder poor pretty Irene swooned when she read all; I wonder the shock did not kill her."

CHAPTER VI.

AS HE LAY DYING ON THE BATTLE-FIELD, HE EXACTED A SOLEMN PROMISE FROM THE FALSE COMRADE WHO BENT OVER HIM.—THE LOCKET WITH THE YOUNG GIRLS PORTRAIT.

No wonder all London was startled by the thrilling *exposé* contained in the extra's. There was a detailed account of Heathcliff's arrest. How he was shadowed by the Scotland Yard detectives, who had first suspicioned him through seeing him pass one of the new bills of the same issue as those taken from Banker Middleton's safe on the night of the robbery.

More bills of the same issue found their way from his purse; then suspicion deepened into a certainty in their minds. They would have waited further developments, but, meeting Heathcliff coming out of the railway station, and realizing he was on the eve of flight—to use their own words—they nabbed their man without further parley.

At first he tried bravado, declaring it was a all mistake; but that failed him, and then when he heard the charge upon which he was apprended, and saw the hand-cuffs, and that there was no chance of escape, he burst into tears. He fell back like one half-fainting, when they drew from the breastpocket of his coat two of the identical packages of money abstracted from the safe.

"It is all up with me," they heard him mutter, in a husky voice that sounded like nothing human. "I have played for heavy stakes and—lost."

He tried to bribe the detectives to take all the money which was about him still,—the diamonds he wore,—everything, and let him go free, but they refused. They were not men to be bought. When he found out how useless all his pleading was, he turned upon them with the ferocious desperation of a criminal brought to bay, and *in the mêlée* which followed, he was severely wounded —*he could be* taken in no other way.

"If I must go, take me away at once," he cried, glancing fearfully back at the waiting-room windows, then down at his manacled wrists.

They hurried him into a coach and drove rapidly to the nearest police station.

When the doctor connected with the precinct looked into his face, he shook his head sagely.

"Well," said the Inspector.

"He will die," returned the doctor, "he could not recover save by a miracle and these are not the days of miracles. He may last until sundown—not longer."

A laugh, low and mocking, fell from the lips of the incredulous prisoner who had been listening intently.

"Such nonsense—sheer nonsense," he cried. "I have only the slightest kind of a pain,—to tell me I shall be dead by sundown is the rankest kind of nonsense. It is the business of doctors to croak and make people miserable," he added, grimly.

But as the hours rolled by and his pain increased, he grew greatly troubled.

"Do you want anything?" asked the nurse, bending over him and holding the cooling water he plead for, to his burning lips.

"I should want something if I really thought I had to die," he cried, hoarsely. "Do you *really* think I am going to die?" and the woman saw him shiver and gasp at the very thought.

"I dare not tell you an untruth," the nurse answered, pityingly. "You are sinking very fast. Is there anything I can do for you? Any message I can send anyone?"

"And I am going to—*die*," he muttered, "and I—I have thought so little about death. I have always had a queer fancy that the old fellow with the reaper would cut others down, but somehow spare me."

"Listen," he cried: "if I thought I was really going to die, I would make a—a—confession. My lips hold a secret and I must tell it before I die. I should not rest in my grave if I did not. My idea of death is *rest*, a long dreamless rest deeper than any sleep. I do not know what comes after it, I have never given any thought to that I should not like my rest disturbed. I should not like

to come wandering back to this world, haunting the place, perhaps, where I have sinned."

"These are feverish, restless thoughts," said the nurse, "the dead do not come back."

"I am not so sure," muttered the dying man; "night and day, I have been haunted by the terrible fear of expecting the spirit of a man back to this world, who had been foully murdered. The terror of watching has cursed my life. "If I am sinking, bring some one to me to hear what I have to say."

She brought the Inspector and two of the officers.

"Time was," muttered the prisoner, "when I would not have dared tell my terrible secret, for I should have gone to the gallows for it, but now—you are *sure* that I shall die?"

And the three voices answered—"Sure!"

"That sounds like a death-knell," murmured the dying man.

After a moment of deep thought, he began speaking, slowly and with difficulty.

"I need not inflict the story of my childhood or youth upon you. Suffice it to say, they were more desolate than seldom falls to the lot of childhood. I can not recall one happy scene—I do not remember one happy hour; I have known every terror, every suffering that poverty is heir to. No wonder my reckless, misspent life has rounded off as it has; I am glad to die and end it all. I will tell my story briefly—it is no common one," he said, beginning with the acknowledgment that it was sure to be known sooner or later. "I am *not* the real Karl Heathcliff!"

If his companions felt surprise, their faces did not betray it; they made no comment and he continued:—

"Nature made me an artist, but a roving disposition and love of adventure made me a soldier. I had drifted to gay Paris; to Berlin, and from thence into Spain. It was at the time that hostilities rent the unhappy kingdom. I volunteered at once, rather pleased with the idea of a brush with the Carlists. Out campaigning on the warm Spanish hills, where lances bristled and cannon roared was the sort of life I loved. Among the other volunteers was a young Englishman, between whom and myself a warm friendship sprung up,—he—was—Karl Heathcliff.

"I learned this much of his history—he was the nephew of a wealthy London banker, John Middleton, whom he had not seen since boyhood. The advantage of a liberal education at Heidelberg University was given him with the understanding that he was at a future date to inherit the greater portion of his uncle's great wealth. He was gay, fun-loving, and reckless; always in disgrace, and therefore always on the worst possible terms with his stern uncle who was always on the look out for some prank of the young fellow's for which he should have to pay. He was expelled from the university for hazing, and as his uncle vowed he should not come to London, he travelled about on the continent, at last drifting into the army; though of this last escapade his uncle knew nothing. He was first in every danger—he knew no fear—he was loved by his comrades and was as good-hearted as he was brave.

"One night soon after the sun had set there was a terrible encounter between the hostile armies, our regiment was literally cut to pieces. Almost the first to fall was my brave young English comrade Heathcliff;—perhaps he was the most reckless and cared the least for his life.

"I caught him as he fell backward, struck down by a shell; he lingered but a few short moments dying, at length, in my arms.

"'Leon—Leon Forrester,' he called, hoarsely—'are you there?' 'Yes,' I answered, pressing his hand as I laid him down on the powder-burned grass.

"'It will soon be all over with me, comrade,' he said, 'there will be no more wanderings, no more travels, no more starlit nights on the Spanish hills, no more camping out, no wild adventures, no perils such as make the heart beat and the pulses thrill—no more for me. It is not quite fair. After all, I have had but a very short life of it; and now to be cut down like this.'

"'Do me one favor, Forrester,' he whispered, faintly; 'if you live to return to England let them, my uncle and my cousin, know my fate. He will not care, perhaps—but Irene, my cousin Irene, will shed a tear for me when she knows how I died. You will find my uncle's address in a note-book on the fly-leaf, and next it my cousin Irene's picture—take the note-book and the picture back to them and—'

"The sentence never was finished—he fell back in my arms on the battle-field—dead.

"I took the letters and papers, together with the picture, from his breast-pocket and transferred them to my own. Amidst the heat of the battle I could not stop to examine them. Months passed before that campaign was over. I came out of it unscathed, and when I reached England I bethought of the comrade I had left dead on the battle-field.

"Searching among my effects I found the packet I had thrust into my breast-pocket, on that fatal day. I opened it now for the first time, and for the first time my eyes gazed upon the pictured face of Irene Middleton.

"I need not describe to you what the picture was like—you have both seen the original. I fairly held my breath as I gazed on the pictured face of the most beautiful being I had ever beheld. I laid down the picture and took up the uncle's address—John Middleton, residence, Hyde Park, London.

"How strange a fate that Heathcliff, who would have inherited so much wealth, should have been struck down, and I, a poor devil of a wandering, struggling artist, spared, I mused.

"Suddenly, there and then, the greatest temptation that ever assailed a human being came to me—a temptation that caused me to catch my breath with a sharp gasp. I lay no claim to conscience—I never had any—and I listened eagerly to the voice of the tempter, which said:—'Here is a golden opportunity; fortune never knocks twice at a man's door. Do not let this chance slip by you; why should you starve, live from hand to hand on your wits with a chance for a fortune before you. Heathcliff has not been seen by his friends for years. They have grown out of all remembrance as to how he looks. No one save yourself knows of the untimely fate which befel him. Why not impersonate him—it had often been said we resembled each other—take his name; go to Banker Middleton, presenting myself at the Hyde Park mansion as his scape-grace nephew, returned to settle down and lead a quiet life.'

"With the private papers I had in my possession who would doubt me?

"*At best I* had nothing to lose. If detection through

some unforeseen event *should* come about—it could not disgrace a poor devil of a strolling artist to any amount. All it required to carry out this grand scheme was pluck and cool audacity.

"I will bring a long story short by admitting that I was successful beyond my wildest plans. I was taken into the household of the banker with stern admonition in regard to the past life I had been leading—and the threat unless I proved myself worthy of becoming his heir, I should find myself a beggar.

"I was now launched fully on the tidal wave of success as Karl Heathcliff. I was lost in happy meditation of all this, when the banker broke in suddenly upon my thoughts saying, as he touched a silver hand-bell close by:—

"'I shall send for your cousin Irene; she is much changed from when you saw her last—a shy, timid little child of seven.'

"'Time makes great changes,' I admitted, modestly. 'Ten years will have made Irene quite a young lady, I presume.'

"'You have been gone over twelve,' retorted Banker Middleton, sharply.

"I saw at once the rock on which I had stumbled, and hastened to make amends, assuring him it seemed but yesterday that I had left him—a stripling of fourteen—and that I could hardly imagine myself now a bearded man of six and twenty.

"While we were speaking I heard the sound of pattering feet in the corridor without, and an instant later the door was thrown open without ceremony, and the loveliest young girl I had ever beheld stood on the threshold.

"'Did you send for me, uncle?' she asked, coming forward with all the grace of a young fawn.

"'Yes, my dear,' said the old banker, fondly.

"As she advanced I had every opportunity of taking in every detail of this superb young creature.

"She was equipped for a ride, and the blue velvet riding-habit she wore, which was edged with silver gray fox fur, fitted her slim, willowy figure to perfection.

"She looked like a tall slip of a girl not over sixteen, yet I had heard in advance that she was nineteen.

"A blue velvet cap with a scarlet bird's-wing at the side,

was pushed carelessly back on a head running over with dark curls, which were tied carelessly back by a bit of ribbon. The dark, sparkling eyes looking out from that rose-leaf face, would have startled any one with their vivid loveliness.

"In one little guantleted hand she held the skirt of her habit, loosely gathered up, displaying a charmingly dainty kid boot, and in the other hand she held a pearl riding-whip.

"'Did you want me, uncle?' she repeated.

"'Yes, Irene,' he answered. 'I want you to welcome your cousin Karl—Karl Heathcliff. He has returned to us after an absence of twelve years. You remember him, do you not, Irene?'

"She came quickly up to me, and I have but a confused idea as to the words in which she welcomed me as she held out her little hand. I was conscious, however, that she added:

"'You do not look one particle like the little boy Karl—my old play-fellow whom I remember so well,' and I felt my face grow hot under the keen gaze of that pair of black eyes.

"Of what use to describe the weeks that followed. I fell violently, madly in love with Irene Middleton; and she—well, she cared as little for me as the wind that blew—I felt it—I knew it.

"Once I came upon her quite unexpectedly in the conservatory, and seized upon the opportunity to say a tender word to her that she might discern the state of my feelings toward her. 'Irene,' I said, softly. She started, dropping the bouquet of roses she was gathering, in a shower at her feet.

"'Have the goodness not to startle me like that again, Mr. Heathcliff,' she said, 'I do not like any one to come upon me in that unexpected manner.'

"'I was so happy at finding you alone, Irene,' I declared, apologetically.

"'I do not know why that should make you happy,' she retorted, with a toss of her dark head.

"'I want to ask you something, Irene,' I said, quietly, 'be kind, be patient, and listen to me.'

"'I am going out calling; a girl-friend is waiting for

me in the drawing-room, say quickly whatever you have to say.'

"I felt that it was most difficult to be sentimental with this young girl. She had turned impatiently from me to the window, and was looking out again at the flowers, one little white hand played with a spray of roses that came peeping in.

"'Irene,' I said, reproachfully, 'won't you turn from those flowers to me? I am jealous of the attention you are paying them.'

"She raised her beautiful eyes and looked at me. 'You are talking nonsense,' she said, loftily, 'and as I do not like nonsense, you will tell me quickly what you are detaining me here to say.'

"It was difficult under such circumstances to be an eloquent wooer, still, I recollected the old adage:

'Faint heart ne'er won fair lady.'

and I said earnestly—pleadingly—'I want to ask you if you will be a little kinder to me, Irene; I admire you so much that I should be the happiest man in the world if you would give me ever so little of your friendship.'

"She seemed to consider the words, to ponder over them, and I took hope from her silence.

"'I am quite unworthy, I know,' I added, 'but if you knew how all my life long I have desired the friendship of a good and noble woman you would be kinder to me,—you would indeed.'

"'You have lived in what the people call "the world" all your life I suppose,' she said, suddenly.

"'Yes,' I replied, wondering curiously what she was thinking of.

"'It is strange then that of all the women you have met you should think me the only good and true one. I say you are not complimentary to the sex.'

"I was taken back. Gracious! what a way to construe what I had said.

"'I did not say those exact words, Irene,' I retorted, flushing hotly.

"'But you certainly implied them,' she declared.

"'I admire you, I like you, Irene,' I cried; 'I could say more but I dare not, you are hard upon me.'

"'I have no wish to be hard,' she said, looking at me

frankly with those intense, dark eyes, 'but you see I am unfortunately what people call plain-spoken—very truthful. You say you wish for my friendship because you like me. Now here is the difficulty. I cannot give it to you because I do not like you. Were you twenty times my uncle's nephew, you see, friendship between us would be rather difficult. That is my opinion *now*, but I will not judge too hastily; I will wait a few days and then decide.'

"She turned carelessly away and before I could recover from my dismay to answer, she had quitted the conservatory."

CHAPTER VII.

IF I WIN HER AT ALL, IT WILL BE THROUGH STRATEGY—NEVER THROUGH LOVE.

FOR a moment the man who lay gasping in the throes of death paused in his story—then went on huskily:

"I looked after Irene as she quitted the conservatory, vowing that I should win her by fair means or foul. I loved her with a fierce, desperate love that at times frightened even myself.

"Was she like Undine, I wondered. What manner of man must he be to wake that soul of hers to perfect life? The time would come when love would find her out, when the fairy prince that all maidens dream of, would wake her from her magic sleep. She was pure and spotless as a white lily; the breath of love had never passed over her.

"The thought came to me that the mind that mastered hers must be a master mind; the soul that could bring her soul into subjection must be a grand soul.

"How was I to win her? Compliments, sweet, soft, words would never do it. One scornful look from those dark bright eyes sent my ideas flying right and left, she has such a way of making a fellow feel small. If that kind of feeling comes over me when I am making her an offer, I often told myself, it will be of no use to plead my suit.

"The conviction came to me slowly, but surely, if I won her at all—*it must be by strategy.* I gave myself up night and day to solving the problem—How it was to be done?

"Would Banker Middleton look with favor on my suit, I wondered; perhaps it would be better to approach him first upon the subject, and that was the beginning of the bitter end.

"On the very afternoon that the thought occurred to me

I put it into execution. Mr. Middleton was very busy with some business he was transacting, but at my urgent request he consented to see me for a few moments in his sitting-room.

"As I entered, he took the great stacks of bills he had been counting over, and placed them in the safe, closing the door to with a resounding bang.

"'Now, sir,' he said, motioning me to a seat 'what is it you want?'

"'I have come to ask a great favor of you, my dear uncle,' I began. 'Eh?' he exclaimed, sharply,—'what do you say?'

"Then it all came out; I told him I loved Irene and wanted to marry her, and words are weak to describe what followed. While I had been speaking I saw his face change, it became fairly purple with rage, with great livid spots upon it; the veins on his hands and neck stood out like whip-cords, and if his eyes could have slain me I would soon have lain dead at his feet.

"'Stop—stop right where you are,' he thundered, fairly foaming at the mouth. 'You must be mad to ask me for my niece.'

"'It is a very common madness,' I replied,—'I love Irene and ask you to give her to me if I can win her.'

"'And I refuse,' cried the old banker, furiously—'I would rather see her lying in her grave than given to you.'

"'Am I so very bad?' I asked, bitterly.

"'You are,' he retorted, 'so very bad that I repeat I would rather see Irene dead than married to you. You do not deceive me,—nephew of mine though you are, you are at heart a villain. I will be frank with you—it is best. In the first place, although you are young, you have led a wicked life of it. I have heard—no matter how—of several little episodes in your college life that would not bear investigation. Irene is not of the class of women you understand. You are not even capable of appreciating her. She is far beyond you. You have broken the heart of more than one fair young girl, I hear,—but you shall never break Irene's.'

"'Good heavens, sir!" I burst out, unable to endure it a moment longer—'you were a young man at one time yourself, and you know that young fellows will be young

fellows, and if they sow their wild oats early in life, so much the better.'

"'If they sow wild oats in their youth they will reap a full and bitter harvest in their old age,' he said, sternly.

"In vain I pleaded with him—it was useless, worse than useless.

"'Enough of this,' he cried, harshly; 'you will find that my yea is yea and my nay is nay, young man! Irene is not for you.'

"'This brings me to another subject,' he went on, abruptly, 'as I have said, I have studied you well since you returned here and I like you less as a man than I did as a boy: you have been brought up with the belief that you were to be my heir; but now—harken to what I say. You shall never receive a shilling of mine to squander it up in viciousness and riotous living. You are not the kind of a man to be entrusted with a fortune. To-morrow, I revoke my will: I shall cut you off with a small amount—the rest I shall bequeath to Irene. Such a man as you needs to *work* for his living to keep him out of mischief.'

"He rose abruptly, to indicate the interview was ended.

"How I made my way from the room I never knew; my head was in a whirl and my heart was on fire. In an evil moment all my hopes were overthrown—from the prospect of wealth and affluence, I saw myself plunged down to absolute beggary again. It was maddening,—maddening!

"I rushed out into the street. I walked here and there for long hours, with my brain still on fire with rage and hate. One thought was uppermost in my mind, how could I prevent the old idiot from changing that will. He would send for his lawyer to-morrow,—whatever was done must be done *to-night*. How I wished he would die in his bed that night.

"The sun went down and the dusk of the summer night crept up; still I paced the busy streets, that one intense thought uppermost in my mind, how could I prevent that will from being changed? I must think—*think!* I knew where he kept that will—in the safe, and I thought of the great stacks of bills I had seen in that safe that afternoon. If I had *them*, I need not worry about poverty, and I hated the man who possessed them

with all the strength of my fierce nature. By some strange fatality—call it what you will—glancing up, I found myself opposite the house. It was quite dark—silent and dark as a grim sentinel carved in stone: just then the clock in a far off belfry chimed the hour of ten.

"With strange fascination I stood leaning against the trees, gazing up with malignant rage in my eyes at the banker's window, my soul warring with conflicting emotions. I had only while the darkness lasted in which to be a rich man. Soon after the sun of the morrow rose I should be disinherited. I ground my teeth together, cursing my luck as I stood there. Suddenly, to my surprise, the carved oaken door opened and there emerged from the darkened corridor the figure of a woman, wrapped in a long, dark cloak, who glided down the marble steps like a phantom and hurried down the street.

"Recovering from my amazement I hurried in swift pursuit overtaking her just as she reached the first corner. Imagine my dismay upon beholding, as the light of the gas-lamp fell full upon her face—Irene.

"'Irene,' I cried, in dismay; 'what can this mean, out alone and at night on the streets of London?'

"She did not answer me; she appeared not to hear me, gazing over my head in a strange, dazed unnatural way. All in an instant, it struck me just what was the matter. *Irene was walking in her sleep; she was a somnambulist.*

"I had heard of the danger of waking one in this condition too suddenly. She flitted on before me like a shadow, I following. She was so fleet of foot I could barely keep pace with her.

"Was it fate that had led this beautiful girl into my power? I thought, with inward satisfaction. What an easy matter it would be to abduct Irene—to take her to—

"My reverie was cut short, for she had suddenly paused before a window in which glimmered a faint light, as from an office back, and to my surprise she put out her white hand hesitatingly, gropingly, found the knob and turned it; it yielded to her touch—the door swung open. I drew back into an adjacent doorway where I could see and hear all that transpired, being at the same time unseen myself, for I had seen a man approaching the door from the interior of the store.

"The night had come on, intensely dark and sultry,

but, by the lightning flashes which preceded the storm, I saw that she had entered the office of the safe and lock company—Oxford Street.

"I saw the young man approach and ask her courteously what she wished, and I almost held my breath with intensity as I heard her murmur something about getting her uncle's safe opened. I heard the young man expostulate, complaining of the lateness of the hour for the work. I could have laughed aloud. Could he not see that the girl before him was in a state of *somnambulism*, utterly unconscious of her surroundings? Incapable of replying, much less comprehending his remarks, she repeated over and over only those words, she must get her uncle's safe open at once, and those replies fitted his remarks with wonderful aptness.

"It is strange how comedy follows on the heels of tragedy, and *vice versa*.

"Though she spoke but those few words, he replied, after a few moments of deliberation, that he would accompany her and open the safe for her.

"Matters were assuming an intense interest for me. How was this affair to end? What would happen if she were to awaken any instant? Surely the man gazing into that lovely, dazed face and expressionless eyes must see that there is something strange, unnatural about her. If he is not too enthralled by the girl's marvellous beauty to observe her closely, he *must* see that this is a case of somnambulism, I considered. But he apparently did not.

"She must have had it on her mind to visit this safe company's office, I judged, for only the week previous she had said to me:

"'Uncle forgets the combination of his safe of late; three times I have been on the point of going to that safe company's office to get some one to open it for him when his memory has returned to him. Alas! this is occurring so frequent of late.'

"This then was the key—the solution to the whole affair.

"My dismay rose at the complication matters were assuming, when I saw the young man prepare to follow her, taking his tools with him.

"As unceremoniously as she had entered the place, she turned abruptly and hurried down the street.

"To my amusement the young man hurried after her, with his case of necessary tools for opening the safe, I, of course following up the rear; I must overtake him and explain the matter to him.

"What law of nature is it that guides somnambulists that they thread their way through intricate places, and return unharmed to their own particular abodes?

"As I saw Irene pass hurriedly up the marble steps, the young man following, a sudden demon seized me, urging me to let the affair proceed,—*it would place Irene in my power.*

"Silently as a shadow I followed into the house, and into the banker's room to which they had proceeded, succeeding in secreting myself behind the heavy velvet portières unseen.

"'This is the safe you wish me to open, I presume?' the young man said, and a moment later he set about his task, Irene having mechanically walked from the room.

"The midnight bells tolled ere he had succeeded in opening the door of the safe. He made little attempt at caution, as he worked, humming every now and then a few bars of popular opera. The noise he made in picking up and laying down his tools must surely awaken the banker in the adjoining room, I thought,—but it did not.

"He waited some little time for the reappearance of the young lady who had summoned him for this task at this unseemly hour. At length, reluctantly, as she was not forthcoming, he took his leave. I heard the outer door close after him with a firm, metallic click.

"It was but the work of a moment for me to secure the money, which was in large packages of bills, and transfer them to my breast-pocket.

"This accomplished, a veritable demon seemed to possess me; for, in examining a small compartment to the right I saw the old banker's will lying before me. To some eager, impetuous natures a sudden temptation comes which, like burning lava, sweeps away all before it. A sudden, terrible temptation came to me, to put the banker suddenly out of the way, then and there: the will standing as it did, would give me all his property. I had no idea of how much or how little he was possessed, and

in connection with this a still more daring thought occurred to me,—I, whose imitation of the banker's handwriting was perfect, could easily insert the clause in that will—*that Irene was to marry me.* If she believed it to be her uncle's wish, she would never refuse to comply with it."

CHAPTER VIII.

A CONVICT'S BRIDE.

"NEED I add, that I accomplished this? My steps were then turned toward the banker's sleeping-room. I had risked too much to turn back now. I crept across the threshold, my eyes gleaming with hate as they rested on the sleeper.

"I had resolved upon the *modus operandi* as to how I was to consummate my plan. I turned out the faint spark of a gas-jet, then turned the gas on full head, hurrying out of the apartment and closing the door tightly after me.

'But, ah! the best laid plan of mice and man
Aft gang aglee.'

"Before I could make my exit from the interior room there was a sound from the old gentleman's valet's room; he had detected the odor of escaping gas.

"In an instant he was out of the room into the corridor. Perdition! Closing the door of the room in which I had darted again, locking the door and putting the key in his pocket, muttering something about having forgotten to do this earlier in the evening. There was no way of escape for me save through the old banker's room —this was rendered impossible now, owing to the valet's presence there.

"In sheer desperation and fearful of detection, I darted back into my place of concealment, back of the heavy velvet portières again.

"And again I muttered—Perdition! The valet had thrown himself down on a divan in his master's room; the banker complaining of a terrible sensation in his head and breast from the effects of the gas he supposed he had turned off wrong.

"A few words more and my confession is ended.

"I was forced to remain in my place of concealment

until a late hour the next day. I witnessed the banker's discovery of the safe having been robbed, as he entered the room with Irene; she, of course, being entirely innocent of the thrilling events that had transpired the previous night.

"When he sent them from the room he bowed his head on his hands, crying aloud that he was ruined—ruined!

"I seized that moment to escape, but, turning sharply around, attracted by a slight noise, he swept the portières asunder and I was—discovered.

"'*You*, are the thief, the robber!' he cried. 'I *knew* it, I felt it!' I struck him down, and he drew his pistol upon me and fired, but the ball, luckily for me, struck a marble pedestal close by, which turned its course and it lodged in his own heart. In the confusion I escaped.

"Now we come to the last act that closed my eventful career. Irene—"

Whatever it was that Heathcliff, or Forrester, as we shall hereafter call him, purposed to say was never uttered; a terrible fit of coughing seized him, which brought on a violent congestion. He sank rapidly and straightway the doctors administered opiates.

The fearful strain of revealing all he had revealed had told upon him, the blood gushed from his mouth in a dark crimson pool.

"It is all over with him," said the doctor. "Here," calling hastily to the attendant, "pour out four drops from that little phial beside my case; it will help him to die easier."

In his extreme nervousness the attendant poured out *ten* drops and it was administered.

"His life will flicker out with the setting of the sun," said the doctor, and, glancing from the window—"the sun is setting now. He will not last five minutes at most." He took out his watch and timed the patient's rapid respiration.

Five minutes passed—ten—the doctor looked slightly puzzled; he bent down closer, an exclamation of surprise breaking from his lips: there was a slight pink glow spreading over Forrester's face—his lips were moist.

"I am of the opinion this man will *live*," he said, shortly.

The overdose of the drug administered by the attendant had saved his life.

The above was the detailed account of the startling story the extras had contained. Who will wonder that Irene fainted outright when she read it, and that Frederick Esmond, steaming into London as quickly as the railway carriage could bring him, devoured every word of it with avidity, clenching the paper as he came to the last word with a shuddering groan.

"Oh Irene—beautiful Irene!" he cried, under his breath, "the happiest day of my life is this in which I find that you are innocent of that terrible robbery, and have been from first to last."

"A somnambulist! Great Heaven! that this did not occur to me before." In a trice, all that had puzzled him was now clear as noon-day to him. A blush of shame rose to his cheeks that he had doubted so noble a girl as Miss Middleton—how he hated himself for it.

What must she have thought of his incomprehensible conduct as he left her on that memorable morning?

How shocked she must have been to learn, too, of the prominent part she played in that midnight robbery—surely the strangest and most wonderful on record.

As a gentleman and a heartfelt sympathizer, he must take all the blame of the occurrence upon himself. He would go before the Inspector of Police at once and corroborate the story told in the extras, taking all the blame for withholding it—let them censure him as bitterly as they would. But first he would call upon Miss Middleton and talk the matter over with her.

He *did* call, but was informed by Mrs. Grey, the housekeeper, that Miss Irene was too ill to see anyone, and judging by present indications it would be several weeks yet before she would be up and about.

When Mrs. Grey read the name, Mr. Esmond, on the card, she glanced up at him timidly.

"You are, I see, sir, the proprietor of the safe and lock works, my poor young lady visited that night. Might I ask as a favor, that you will kindly request the young man who opened the safe to say as little about the affair as possible?"

"I acquiesce most heartily," he responded, "for *I* am that identical person, my dear madam."

It was just a week to Forrester's trial; it would be a nine days' wonder in London, especially when it came to light that the wealthy young safe manufacturer himself was the hero of that strange episode regarding the safe which had been opened at midnight.

Irene had told no human being that she had married Forrester on the day he was apprehended—not even when Mrs. Grey, the old housekeeper, said earnestly:—

"What a lucky thing that you escaped a marriage with that notorious man, Irene, and to think, too, that *I* advised, aye, even *urged* you to it, but I did it for your good, my dear girl. I believed him to be your cousin,—the true Karl Heathcliff,—and I thought wedding this wealthy young man would be better than being tossed about on the cruel world. The best of us advise quite wrong, at times, my dear."

Irene bowed her dark, curly head, vouchsafing no reply, sobbing as though her heart would break, but young hearts do not often break even through the agonized praying that they may.

The days that followed were like the tortures of the rack to Irene. She knew that Forrester had entirely recovered. She read that in the papers. Why was he keeping silent about the marriage? surely it was not done to spare her. She had driven herself almost frantic with fear, wondering what she should do if her husband—how she loathed the sound of the name—were set free and came to claim her: she should fall dead at his feet, she was sure of it.

"If the story of my marriage with that robber and would-be assassin is made known, I will kill myself," she sobbed, desperately, "I—I—could not face the exposure and the shame."

The trial was set for the tenth of September. Irene scarcely knew how she lived up to that time. Day after day passed and yet he had not betrayed that terribly cruel marriage.

All the night long preceding the day set for his trial, Irene paced the floor of her room, crying out to Heaven to keep her from going mad.

She did not love the man she had married. She had

been *forced* into marrying him, as it were, through her great love for her uncle and her desire to obey any wish of his.

All that night Irene watched the stars while the others slept, until the crimson dawn that looked so fair in the eastern sky broke once again over the earth.

Was *he* watching the rise of the early dawn through the prison bars? What would he do? would he write to her—claim her at the last moment or let her rest in peace? In a very few hours he would know his fate *she* would know it—she—the convict's bride.

At the very ouset of the trial Irene had been stricken with a dangerous fever. For days her life had been despaired of; this prevented her from obeying the summons to be present at the trial; she was, therefore, mercifully spared being brought face to face with Forrester.

For long hours Irene sat by the window neither stirring or moving. At length, those from the villa who had been obliged to be at the trial, returned.

A few moments later Mrs. Grey tapped lightly on the door.

"Come in," said Irene, nervously, and the housekeeper entered; but she started back with a low cry when she beheld the white face the girl turned to her, and the great, hollow circles under the eyes.

"You are not so well to-day, Miss Irene," she declared; "I should not have disturbed you; young Forrester's trial is over; I thought you would like to hear what his sentence was."

"Yes," whispered Irene, and the housekeeper was puzzled by the strange sound of her voice.

"Ten years' penal servitude," said Mrs. Grey. No word fell from Irene's lips; she could not have uttered a word to have saved her life.

"He was led away cursing and raving," continued Mrs. Grey; "he said he had something to say, but of course no one would listen to him, every one said he should have had a life sentence."

At that moment Mrs. Grey was called from the room and Irene was left alone.

Alone with her conflicting, terrorizing thoughts. Ten years' penal servitude. The words seemed to repeat

themselves over and over again in the stillness of the room like distant thunder.

It would be ten years ere this man would be free to come and claim her.

She raised her tear-blinded eyes to the sunlit sky, crying out from the fulness of her heart that if, at the end of that time, he *should* come to her, she would kill herself rather than go with him.

Ten years! that seemed a lifetime to the girl who lay sobbing there. Ah! if she put the distance of the whole wide world between them by the end of that time, if she could go where he could never trace her, if he hunted her down, she could die.

How strange it was, she thought, that even *now* he did not divulge the story of his marriage; surely it could not be that he remained silent simply to spare her name. She concluded that must be the case, however, when all was over and he had been taken away, and yet he had not spoken.

"My lips shall never be the first to blazen so cruel a story to the world," she murmured, with pitiful sobs, over and over again. Ah! if she could but keep it hidden from all human beings for ten long years, she would suffer any torture rather than it should be known.

The world should not know that she was this man's wife, she would keep the cruel truth locked up in her own bosom up to the very last moment possible.

And this fatal decision was the rock that wrecked her future.

"Ah, what a fatal web we weave
When first we practise to deceive."

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRETTIEST GIRL IN LONDON WILL BE AT THE DUCHESS' BALL TO-NIGHT, BUT I WARN YOU AGAINST HER.

ALTHOUGH Frederick Esmond had been denied the privilege of seeing Miss Middleton when he had called at the mansion in Hyde Park, he took the opportunity of calling again as soon as was practicable. Inquiry elicted the startling fact that the house was closed. The servants had all been discharged, and Miss Middleton had gone none knew whither.

Esmond was in despair. Had he found this fair girl but to lose her again in this fashion? The world was wide, but he vowed to himself he should meet her again even though he travelled the world over to find her.

Esmond put forth every effort but it seemed all in vain, he could not obtain the slightest trace of her. Months flew by on golden wings, summer had passed away and winter with its gay season of festivities was setting in, in London, and still Miss Middleton was quite as completely lost to the world, it seemed, as though the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed her.

While Esmond was searching so desperately, the object of his search was but a few miles distant from London. The winter passed and spring rolled round again. When the Middleton mansion was closed, Irene had gone directly to the Duchess of Heath.

The lady had in earlier years, been Irene's governess. It was at the mansion in Hyde Park that the Duke of Heath had first met the lady who afterwards became his wife.

When the duchess heard of the banker's sudden death, she sent for Irene at once. "I am stopping at my country seat, Rosedale, in the village of Kent," she wrote,—"come to me here at once, my dear," and Irene went.

The duchess received her with open arms.

"How much you have passed through of late, my dear," she said, smoothing back the girl's dark tumbled curls. "You will find perfect rest and quiet here; and we shall soon woo back the roses to these pale cheeks."

As the days and weeks wore on, much to the surprise of the duchess and her friends Irene began to droop more perceptibly than ever.

"Time should assuage her grief," said the duchess to herself, "of course she loved her uncle very dearly but one cannot live by the dead—we may reverence their memory, but it is not right to mourn for them after *this* fashion, for, 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away'—Irene must be made to realize that.',

How little she dreamed that it was the burden of a cruel secret that was wearing Irene's young life out.

It became the one dread of the girl's life lest anyone by chance should discover that she had wedded the handsome villain, who had played such high and desperate stakes to win her.

Poor Irene—she would look around her with tearful eyes, asking herself how long she had to live, how long she must carry this burden of sorrow and shame. There was no help for her; no human power could aid her; she had taken her vows before Heaven to cleave to the man she had wedded until death should them part, and now only Heaven could free her from them. There were times when she cried out to herself that she wished she could wake up and find it but a horrible dream—that she might wake and find herself still Irene Middleton again. But ah, it could not be. She must live her life for ten long years—then he would come to search for her and the whole world would blazon with her story. If she herself could but forget it for those ten years that seemed like a respite from the dark future that lay beyond.

"I *must* forget," she cried; "to remember will drive me mad."

The duchess consulted her husband time and again in reference to Irene. One day she said, thoughtfully:—

"I would give so much to see her as she used to be—a bright, willful darling at one and the same time, the delight and the torment of the household.

The duchess remembered how she used to throw her arms around her when she implored her to study, declar-

ing that she could not study while the sun shone and the birds sang outside.

"Do come out into the grounds with me," Irene would add, "let us throw away the books. I know quite enough already. Have you ever thought how cruel it would be to shut up a starling in a cage and set him at a task? It is more cruel to shut me up in a school-room with tiresome books before me," and the next instant the grammar, history, geography and all the other books would be lying in a heap where Irene had tossed them, and the girl herself would be flying through the open French window, out on to the lawn. It was only by the greatest dint of coaxing that her governess could get Irene to open her books when she gravely took them out on the lawn to her. But by the greatest of patience she did manage very adroitly to cram a great deal of knowledge into the dark, curly head as they sat together under the blossoming almond trees.

The duchess, looking at Irene now, could scarcely imagine her the wilful darling of those other days. She took a great interest in Irene for she really loved the girl.

"We are to go back to town the first of next week, Irene?" the duchess said one day, "shall you like that arangement?"

"As well as any other," answered Irene, indifferently.

Irene accompanied them back to London, but no inducement could draw her any where near the house in Hyde Park—she seemed to have a perfect horror of the place.

"I have invited quite a party of young folks to visit me—you will not have much time for loneliness, Irene," said the duchess—"if you care for company."

Irene found life at the duchess' town house pleasant enough; she always had a large party of young folks gathered about her. She liked fair young faces and the gay laughter of hearts, untrammelled by the world's woes, about her. Every one liked visiting the Duchess of Heath, because there was such a glad absence of formality and restraint; each one did pretty much as they liked, amusing him or herself according to taste or fancy. No one was ever dull.

The season was to be inaugurated by a grand ball, and

no one in all London was more famous in getting up these grand balls than the amiable duchess.

In obedience to the late banker's will, Irene had laid aside her sombre black robes, and the donning of light dresses seemed almost like the dawning of a new life to Irene.

"I will give myself up to gayety and pleasure for ten short years," she would mutter over and over again to herself, "and at the end of that time I can but die."

To the duchess' dismay, Irene plunged body and soul, as it were, into the whirl of gayety, going from one extreme to the other, without cessation.

"I do not like this change in Irene," said the duchess to her husband one day; "the girl is literally wearing herself out. She is never for one moment without excitement of some kind or other: as for leisure, quiet, tranquillity, they are pursuits she seems to detest; she crowds as much pleasure as possible into every moment."

"That is quite right," declared the duke; "she can have but one youth-time, and youth is the time for gayety, my dear."

"But there ought to be a happy limit," replied the duchess; "gayety is delightful, but there is such a possibility of having too much. I said to her only a little while since, 'I do not think you have one hour's quiet, Irene.' She raised her lovely face to mine and I was startled by its awful pallor."

"'Excitement is more to me than the air I breathe,' she said, 'it keeps me alive. If I were to be quiet I should soon die;' and that is the saddest confession I have ever heard from a young girl's lips. I can understand people almost without a soul, people weighed down by remorse, leading such a life, but a young girl, like Irene, ought to find life pleasant enough without it. She cannot have had any love affairs or I should have heard of them. Irene has never had a lover, I am sure; indeed, she cannot tolerate the idea of one."

"Most young girls like plenty of lovers," laughed the duke.

"Not so Irene," replied the duchess; "I spoke to her recently of the probability of her marrying before the season was well over, and she threw herself into my arms with a cry that startled me."

"'Never mention lovers or—or—marriage to me, dear duchess," she sobbed, 'I cannot endure it. I—I—shall not marry.'"

The duke laughed. "Do not pin your faith on that remark," he said, looking smilingly down into the duchess' grave, thoughtful face; "depend upon it, Irene will not say that when the right one comes along. Do you know I had the idea that she fancied my nephew when he first came here—the poor fellow is desperately in love with her—but I saw later on what he refused to believe, that she was not even interested in him. Still, there is no telling what time may accomplish. I often say to Victor Ross, don't lose courage, my boy, remember:

'Faint heart ne'er won fair lady.'

He left us rather disheartened, but I suppose he will return in time to help you arrange for your coming lawn *fête* and ball. I should be almost at a loss as to how to get along without him on that occasion."

Great preparations had been made for this ball for the past fortnight; the duchess meant that it should outvie anything she had ever done in that line before. The *élite* of London were invited, and she noted with much satisfaction that few of the invitations were declined, which argued well for its being a decided social event.

A card had been sent to Frederick Esmond, and had been accepted, simply because the Duke of Heath and his father had been such old-time friends.

Esmond did not go to many entertainments: dinners given by celebrated M.P.'s, *soirées* held by the wives of great statesmen, were the entertainments he favored most. He did not care much for balls and seldom went to them; but when he made the discovery that his old college chum, Victor Ross, was a nephew of the duke (which he had never known before), and was to be there as a matter of course, the affair did not seem such a bore to him.

"You will see some of the prettiest faces in London at the duchess' ball," declared Ross, as they met in a *café* a few days previous.

"That is not my weakness," laughed Frederick Esmond. "I would rather meet eminent politicians than *pretty faces*."

"There is one young lady visiting the duchess, who is certainly the most beautiful the world holds," said the young student.

"You are eloquent," smiled Esmond, amusedly.

"All the eloquence I can command could not draw a picture for you of what this girl is like. It would take a poet or an artist to describe her. I should not know how to begin. I only know that her features are perfect, her color like a wild rose, and her eyes—surely there never were such a pair of eyes before, large, dark, velvety, like the purple heart of a pansy. I can imagine that any man looking into such eyes would be lost—and forget everything else."

"Have you looked into them?" asked Esmond, quietly.

The young student actually blushed. "I have been staying at the duchess' villa for a fortnight past, and I have not been the same man since first I crossed that threshold," he answered.

"You seem to admire her exceedingly," said Esmond, indifferently, adding, "as for myself, I take very little interest in beautiful women, the most of them are coquettes, especially society women."

"'Admire her' are weak words," returned the handsome young student, warmly. "I will tell you this much, Esmond, I intend to win her if I can."

"I wish you all the success in the world, my dear fellow," replied Esmond, heartily—but he would not have said that a little later on.

"Do you know," said Victor Ross, in a low, intense voice, "if any other man should win her from me, I would be that man's bitter enemy to the day of my death, even though he were my own brother. You can judge by that how much I care for the young lady."

Esmond never realized before how much earnestness there was in Victor Ross' nature,—but then, love changes a man wonderfully. He knew that by experience.

CHAPTER X.

"WITH THEE CONVERSING, I FORGET ALL TIME."

THE Duchess of Heath deserved her well-earned reputation of giving the most delightful of all the London balls. She would not invite people because they were wealthy and fashionable, unless they were at the same time agreeable. She liked to see her rooms filled with fair faces: she knew that eligible men were sure to follow. She had a great liking for original people, so that there was, as a rule, more amusement at her balls than at any others.

On this night her rooms were superbly decorated. Tier after tier of magnificent bloom rose in the ball-room; tall graceful palms had been so arranged that they formed pretty little nooks and corners where one might talk unseen. The grounds were illuminated; the lamps shone like great pearls among the trees, and the warmth and brightness within contrasted pleasantly with the cool, leafy greenness of the grounds without.

The rooms were well crowded when Esmond arrived. The duchess received him with the greatest *empressement*. He could not help feeling a little flattered.

At a little distance he saw his friend Ross, standing by an arched doorway, looking unhappy enough.

"Why are you not dancing, my dear fellow, while so many bright eyes are challenging you from all quarters."

"I will tell you what I am doing," said Ross, frowning darkly. "I am keeping watch. You remember that young lady I was speaking to you about. Well, I have just seen her go into the conservatory with that jackanapes of a French count, Monsieur Ballou, I believe they call him. He's a despicable fellow, always hanging around after her. If he wasn't such an expert shot, by the Lord Harry, I'd challenge him to a duel on the spot for persistently annoying that girl. I am *sure* he annoys *her.*"

"I shall stay here until they come out," declared Ross, determinedly; "they must come out soon; why they have been long enough in there to have examined every plant in the conservatory twice over. Ah, they are coming at last," said Ross, with a great sigh of relief, as he clutched his friend's arm. "Come, let me present you."

Esmond had not the least desire to be presented to this houri with whom his friend was so desperately in love, but he allowed himself to be drawn forward.

"See how that miserable French count bends over her, smiling like a hyena," cried Ross, savagely, crushing something very like an imprecation through his white, set teeth. "Can't you see how bored she looks?"

"Where are they?" asked Esmond, in no little amusement at his friend's anger.

"Don't you see the two just coming out from that green arch,—the young girl stopping to caress the swaying crimson blossoms of that India plant? See, they are coming this way; you will have a full view of her face when she turns from that jackanapes to look in this direction."

Following where Ross had indicated, Esmond saw a picture that he never forgot while he lived.

There was a beautiful overhanging plant, green, with rich, crimson flowers that hung down like the tendrils of the jasmine;—they formed a beautiful natural arch, and a young girl was standing underneath it. Her face was turned from him. He never saw the man to whom she was speaking, he never thought of him—every sense, every thought, was engrossed in her.

He saw a tall, slender figure, every line and curve of which was full of grace, the draperies of palest green silk and fine white lace were looped up with a simple cluster of white rose-buds and long, shining grasses,—white rose-buds were mingled with the lace on her breast, and a small knot of the same flowers were twined amidst her dark curls.

"She must indeed be a charming creature if her form corresponds with that face," murmured Esmond.

"Come, make haste," cried Ross, fairly dragging him forward. The next instant they were standing before her.

Esmond drew back with a gasp of joy: as she turned

her beautiful face, he beheld the girl for whom he had been searching so long and so vainly—Irene Middleton.

She recognized him, instantly, as he could see from the sudden paling and flushing of her face as their eyes met. He never remembered in what words Ross made that presentation; for the first time in his life Esmond lost the debonair self-possession which characterized him.

"Miss Middleton and I have met before," he stammered, and it occurred to him that Ross did not know under what circumstances (as he had but recently returned to London from college) that he had met this young lady. The count, with a bow, had surrendered Irene, and at this propitious moment some one came in search of Victor Ross,—much to that young gentleman's intense annoyance, and Esmond's great relief.

"I will return in a very few moments, Miss Middleton," said Ross, "remember the next waltz is ours," and he bowed himself from her presence, inwardly chagrined at leaving her with so handsome and agreeable a man as Esmond, and mentally wondering why Esmond had not told him that he knew Irene Middleton. It had not occurred to him that he had not mentioned her name, in speaking of her.

Left to themselves, Esmond turned to her quickly,—"It is warm here," he said, "and there is some little time yet before that waltz, will you try an ice?"

"It *is* warm," she answered. "I shall be grateful for it."

He offered her his arm; she placed her little white hand upon it and they walked off together.

The next half hour that followed passed like a dream to Esmond. By tacit consent neither of them made the slightest allusion to that past which both would fain forget.

For the first time in months, smiles came to the lovely crimson lips as she listened to Esmond.

He was a young man particularly gifted, clever and quick of comprehension: he had the great gift of understanding character, and adapting himself to those with whom he was brought in contact. Never before had he exerted himself to interest and please as he did to-night. Can it be wondered that he took Irene's imagination captive, and charmed her artistic beauty-loving mind? She

sat with clasped hands, looking into his noble, earnest face, drinking in each word as it fell from his lips.

Suddenly the soft, sweet strains of the "Soldaten Lieder" floated through the open doors. Esmond looked at his companion. "This is Mr. Ross' waltz with you," he said, "he will be looking for you with the utmost impatience; I sincerely beg your pardon for spiriting you away from the ball-room and keeping you away so long. If I were fond of quotations I would use one now, Miss Middleton, I could say:—'with thee conversing I forget all time.''

He offered her his arm, her face flushed as she took it, and she was vaguely conscious that her hand trembled.

What did it mean?—why should her hand tremble as it touched his arm. "What is coming to me," she thought, impatiently, "surely I am not growing awkward and nervous." She tried to throw off the feeling, she looked up at him with some careless, laughing remark, and then as suddenly dropped her eyes again, while a hot flush seemed to burn her face, for he was looking at her earnestly and something in that gaze made her slumbering heart beat as it had never beaten before.

They went back through the long suite of brilliantly lighted rooms, coming at length face to face with Mr. Ross, who looked exceedingly perturbed as he saw her for whom he was searching, slowly advancing, leaning upon Esmond's arm.

"I owe you many thanks, Mr. Esmond," said Ross, stiffly; "you knew I would be searching for Miss Middleton—that I was to return to her—you forgot all about it."

"I am sorry, I *did* forget," said Esmond, flushing and smiling.

"I knew you would," said Mr. Ross, driven to desperation by the state of affairs.

As he looked at Esmond's handsome debonair face he said to himself, "Surely he has not fallen in love with her too!"

"Before I relinquish you, let me ask for the waltz that follows this, Miss Middleton," said Esmond, eagerly, and Ross bit his lip with fierce vexation and jealousy as he saw her hand Esmond her dainty tablet and he jotted down his name, returning it with a low bow.

The remainder of the evening passed like a dream to Irene Middleton, the homage offered her, the countless compliments that she received, the music, the lights, and the flowers, were all parts of a confused dream from which she did not awaken, until Frederick Esmond came to claim her for the promised waltz—and with that waltz, a new life-drama was began.

Victor Ross stood looking after them with darkening brow and compressed lips,—"If he asks her to dance again I shall hate him," he thought.

The way in which they waltzed together was simply perfection—the very poetry of graceful motion; it was rather floating to the sweetest strains of music than dancing. Ross turned away with some strong muttered words between his teeth, vowing that he hated waltzing. He had never known a waltz so long and so tedious.

During the remainder of the evening both gentlemen lingered by the beauty's side; each ignoring the angry looks of the other.

"If it is to be a drawn battle between us as to which will win her, so be it," muttered Victor Ross, "he will find out this much, I will never give her up."

CHAPTER XI.

FATE SETTLES THE MATTER FOR THE HANDSOME YOUNG STUDENT.

THE grand ball was over at last, and an hour later Irene was seated before the open window in her room, her lovely dark hair all unbound, falling in dark, heavy curls around her. She had laid aside her magnificent dress, and robed in a pale blue cashmere *négligé*, she looked even more beautiful than in full dress. The duchess had come in to say "good night," and ask her how she had enjoyed the ball.

"I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed it," murmured Irene; I—I—was sorry when it was all over, it seemed like coming from Eden back to this cold, bitter world."

"I think, Irene," said the duchess, "that some one helped to make it very pleasant for you."

"I had a great many very nice partners," returned Irene, her fair face flushing.

"We will not talk about it to-night—or rather, so early in the new-born day; I see we are in the 'wee sma' hours," glancing at the ormolu clock on the marble mantel; "you will join me at ten o'clock breakfast, and we will talk it over then over our chocolate," said the duchess, kissing her. "Good night, Irene, and sweet dreams," and with these words she left her.

Irene must have been tired; but no sleep came to those dark, brilliant eyes; she crossed over to the window, drew aside the heavy silken curtains, and looked out at the stars gleaming in the blue sky.

"For long months the face of Mr. Esmond has haunted me," she murmured; "now we have met again."

Ringing like sweetest music in her ears was the sound of his voice. How was it? she had heard many voices, yet the memory of one had never lingered with her be

fore;—not one accent, not one word was lost upon her, she thought him the kindliest gentleman she had ever met.

"Well," said the duchess to her nephew, when she met him in the corridor the next morning, "How do you prosper with your wooing, my dear fellow?"

Ross thrust his hands deep into his pockets and gazed gloomily from the window.

"I do not prosper at all," he answered, brusquely. "How do you expect me to stand any chance of winning so much as a glance from Miss Middleton, when you invite continually such fellows here to meet her as that detestible French count and—and—Esmond, who is known as one of the wealthiest and most eligible men in London,—even without the title which he disdains to wear. How do you expect me, only a poor devil of a student, to stand any chance with such men."

"I am sure you ought to hold your own against any of them, my dear boy," declared the duchess, looking laughingly at the handsome, disconsolate young student, "but there is one thing I would advise, Victor," she went on, earnestly, "and that is, never allow your impulsive affection to get the better of your judgment. If you see plainly that Irene prefers another to yourself, abandon the field gracefully, that is the best way."

"Do you mean—give up the field easily?—stand quietly by and see another man woo and win the only woman I can ever love?—Such advice coming from a sensible woman amazes me. You can depend upon it I am not likely to do anything of the kind."

When Victor Ross sought Irene in the drawing-room that afternoon, he found to his dismay, Esmond was with her.

A group of ladies and gentlemen were examining some fine engravings that had just arrived. Esmond and Irene were at the piano quite alone by themselves.

If he thinks to monopolize Miss Middleton's society after that fashion, he will find he has much difficulty to face, thought Ross, biting his lips with vexation.

He crossed directly over to the piano, and after bowing stiffly to Esmond took his place at the other end of the instrument, and remained there with a pertinacity that was more than annoying to Esmond.

Irene tried to distribute her words and her smiles equally between the two gentlemen. Neither would address one word to the other, but directed his conversation directly to her.

"Will you sing to me?" asked Ross, determined that his rival should not have one moment's conversation with her if he could prevent it;—already he had begun to call Esmond that in his own mind.

"Certainly," replied Irene, running her slim, white fingers over the keys, murmuring more to herself than to either of them, "I wonder what it shall be."

"Sing 'My Queen;' that is my favorite song," said Victor Ross.

"Sing 'I have loved thee since the day I met thee first,'" said Esmond, in a low, vibrating voice. Both gentlemen had spoken together, the situation was therefore embarrassing to Irene. She was too gentle to willingly offend either.

"Suppose I sing you my own favorite," she said, and both eagerly assented.

"I read these beautiful words the other day," she went on, "and they haunted me so I set them to music and have been singing them ever since."

Irene had taken to music naturally, as birds take to song. She played with the most exquisite taste; it seemed as though the half awakened soul found its voice in her glorious gift of song. Her voice was of the rarest beauty—a contralto full of sweetness.

The song was a beautiful one and Irene sang in a clear, sweet voice, that had an undertone of sadness in it;

"There's an end to all toiling some day,
But its weary the waiting—weary!
There's a harbor, somewhere, in a peaceful bay,
Where the sails will be furled and the ship will lay
At anchor—somewhere, in the far away—
But its weary the waiting—weary!

"There's an end to the troubles of souls oppressed
But its weary the waiting—weary!
Sometime in the future, when God thinks best,
He'll lay us down tenderly to rest,
And roses 'll grow from the thorns in the breast—
But its weary the waiting—weary!

"There's an end to the world with its stormy frown—
But its weary the waiting—weary!
There's a light somewhere that no dark can drown,
And where life's sad burdens are all laid down;
A crown—thank God—for each cross a crown!—
But its weary the waiting—weary!"

"Very beautiful, but very melancholy," said Victor Ross, when the last note died away.

"All music should be sad," replied Miss Middleton, "sadness is the key-note of nature."

"That sounds strangely from the lips of a young girl," said Victor Ross, laughingly; "what should you know of sorrow such as fills the great world."

The lovely face paled. "Ah, if he but knew," thought Irene, with a shudder.

"I have sung all my spirits away," she said, "but then, I always do."

When she rose from the piano the two gentlemen rose with her; they could endure that she should leave them both together—neither would have left her first.

There is nothing the world enjoys more than a comedy of lovers. The world looked on with laughing eyes at the fierce dislike that was growing up in the hearts of these two, who had once been such firm friends.

"Which will she choose?"—"How will it end?" were the two questions people asked each other.

It was becoming a serious matter with both Esmond and Victor Ross; both loved Irene, and neither would yield in the slightest degree to the other.

Both decided upon the same plan of action: to ask Irene to be his wife, thereby settling this bitter rivalry at once and forever.

Both pitied his rival, being confident she would accept himself.

That every evening, fate settled the matter in a strange way for the young student, bringing his dream of love to an abrupt ending.

He had gone out into the rose garden to enjoy a cigar in solitude under the trees. Tempted by the beauty of the night he sat long after his cigar was finished, indulging in fanciful day dreams—dreaming of a bright future with dark-eyed, sweet Irene by his side. Planning how

he should work for her day and night—of the name and fame he should build for himself, all for her dear sake.

It was a pity the poor fellow could not have dreamt on forever thus—for those airy day dreams were destined to be his last.

He was startled at length by the sound of voices.

He did not care to be disturbed; he felt in no mood to be amiable to any of the young ladies—listening to their small talk, and being forced to pay idle compliments because they were expected.

"I will wait here until the young ladies pass by," he told himself, leaning carelessly back upon the rustic bench.

They were very near him; he could see two slender, white-robed forms scarcely ten feet from him, quite distinctly through the green foliage.

One of the ladies was talking in a low, earnest voice, which he readily detected as the duchess.

Victor Ross was no eavesdropper; he despised anything so mean as to listen to conversation not intended for his ears; he did not make his presence known, believing they would soon pass on.

In this he was mistaken; they stopped short in the moonlit path, so near the secluded nook in which he had ensconced himself, that he could easily have put out his hand and touched them.

"My dear girl," the duchess was saying, "of course you know best; but I should advise you to think twice before you refuse such a lover if he asks you to wed him. Victor Ross loves you, and the day is not far off when he will tell you so. I tell you this because you are so blind you do not see it, Irene."

Then it was Irene to whom the duchess was talking.

In an instant Victor Ross was painfully alert. He could surely be pardoned for waiting breathlessly for the reply that would fall from Irene's lips; for did not the issue of his whole future depend on what her answer would be?

A low, sobbing cry answered the duchess. "I hope and pray that he may not care for me," Irene said, huskily; "for oh, believe me, it could never be. I do not love Mr. Ross, and—and—I could never be his wife."

"You might learn to care for him in time," urged the duchess, "he is all that is good and manly."

"He is all that, I grant you," replied Irene, sadly; "but were he a king on his throne I *could not* marry him. Nothing could change that."

"It will be the saddest blow he has ever received when you have to tell him that," replied the duchess, "for I repeat, he is sure to ask you."

"Would to Heaven he may *never* ask me," murmured Irene, fervently; "it would grieve me so much to inflict pain upon a human creature."

"Of course if you do not love him you cannot help it, my dear," returned the duchess, ruefully; "love goes where the Lord sends it, to be sure, but, it is such a sad pity to see a life wrecked for love as I feel sure Victor's will be."

"Do not say so," replied Irene, "as he is good and manly, he will be brave; he will learn to live and forget. The time will come," she added in a low voice, "when he will see why he should not have loved me. If I have ever given him one look or one word of encouragement, Heaven forgive me, I did not know it."

They passed on, leaving the young man, who sat rigidly upright against the lime tree with a face as pale as death and a heart as cold as a stone.

All in a moment his love dream was shattered, and his hopes lay in ruins around him.

For a moment he was stunned past realizing it. The great shock—the terrible sorrow—had come upon him so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that it found him unprepared to face it.

The words he had heard seemed to him but the coinage of some horrible nightmare from which he should awake presently.

Slowly it all came back to him word for word. He repeated it to himself over and over again, as though drilling the words into his benumbed heart.

By midnight—yes, he had paced up and down under the trees until the midnight bells tolled—he had gained the mastery over his sorrow. He made the decision to quit London before the morrow's light, and that too without seeing Irene again.

CHAPTER XII.

NOT A ROSE SHALL BLOOM WITHOUT A THORN.

WITH the morning's light, Victor Ross' resolution that he would leave without seeing Irene again, wavered.

Why should he deny himself the privilege of looking just once more on that girlish face that had been the load-star of his life; hereafter he would see it only in his dreams.

They allowed a dying man to look as long as he could at the sun; why should he not linger by her side a few brief moments to say farewell. It would not hurt her, and it was his last gleam of happiness. He would go away then—it did not matter where. Life would be no longer sweet for him when it did not hold Irene Middleton, and he thought of the lines:—

"How strange it seems, that law of Heav'n's ordaining,
That not a rose should bloom without a thorn,
And when the cup of joy we would be draining,
Then from our lips so oft 'tis rudely torn!
In thy dear eyes long since did I discover
The beacon-light of loving constancy:
Yet we must part—our happy dream is over—
Farewell—farewell, dear love—'twas not to be!

"Pain, toil, and sorrow long my life had blighted;
Storm-tost I wandered, with sad care opprest;
And in the gloom I soon had fall'n benighted
Hadst thou not soothed my aching heart to rest.
In thy dear arms methought Life would recover
Its vanished joys—I'd live again for thee—
Yet we must part—our happy dream is over.
Farewell—farewell, dear love—'twas not to be!

"Low moans the wind; the heavens, threatening lower;
O'er moor and mountain swift the storm-wrack flies;
Sad Nature's tears fall fast, a pitying shower.
And dark as night the path before me lies;

Yet, an it lead to winter or fair weather,
Of thee, dear love, I still shall think of thee.
Heav'n's will be done!—our happy dream is over—
Farewell,—farewell, dear love—'twas not to be!"

He knew if he waited long enough in the rose arbor, he should see her walking in the garden among the roses, as was her usual morning custom.

Irene was an early riser; it was not long ere she made her appearance on the terrace.

She had proceeded but a short distance ere she was startled by a tall figure emerging from among the tall flowering shrubs, and standing directly in the path before her. The second glance showed her it was Mr. Ross.

"I knew you would be here, Miss Middleton," he said, "I have been watching for you."

Irene gave a perceptible start, glancing uneasily at the white, haggard face confronting her, the duchess' words occurring to her.

"I have come to say farewell to you, Miss Middleton," he said. "I leave London this morning."

"Leave London, this morning!" repeated Irene, in wonderment. "Why, is it possible! Is it not rather sudden?"

"Yes," he answered, huskily.

"Where do you go?" she asked.

"That I have not determined yet. My one desire is to get as far away from here as steam will take me."

She held out her slim, white hand to him and he clasped it, eagerly bending his pale face over it.

"I am going so far away that in all probability we may never meet again," he said, wistfully. "But there is one thing I should like you to remember, and that is—that my life will always be at your service. If ever the time should come in which you require a true and steadfast friend, with a strong will and a brave heart, will you remember me?"

"Yes," she said, gently; and in after years those words came back to her. And thus they parted, little dreaming under what circumstances they were destined to meet again.

Without another word, Victor Ross had turned and left her, carrying away the picture with him of that tall, slim

figure, standing in the early glow of the morning sunlight.

He turned when he reached the brow of the hill and took one glance back. Irene was still standing amidst the roses, one white hand shading her dark eyes from the sun's level rays as she watched him out of sight, and again a line or two of poetry drifted through his mind, and he thought how true it was :—

> "Whom first we love, alas! we seldom wed,
> Time rules us all. And life, indeed, is not
> The thing we planned it out ere hope was dead."

The sudden departure of Victor Ross caused considerable consternation among the young ladies, for he was a general favorite.

He had left a hastily written note for the duke and the duchess, as an apology for not remaining to bid them good-bye.

She guessed immediately *why* he had gone, Irene must have refused an offer of marriage from him. Her surprise was great to learn from Irene that he had made no such offer—that he had simply bidden her a hasty good-bye, telling her he was going away.

The duchess was mystified. She could not understand it. "Did he mention where he was going?" she asked.

"No," replied Irene.

"Or when he would return?"

"He said he might never return."

"Perhaps he has not gone at all, but took that way as a ruse to find out if you care for him, or not," said the duchess, thoughtfully.

"I think you will find that he has really gone," replied Irene. "John, the coachman, drove him to the railway station to catch the out-going early express."

"That is certainly proof positive," returned the duchess.

Esmond felt greatly relieved when he learned that his rival had beat an ignominious retreat and left the field, as it were, to himself.

People began to smile meaningly at last when they were seen together, and it was settled that as a matter of course wherever Miss Middleton was, there Mr. Esmond was to be found.

Everyone noticed his devotion to her, strange to say, except the young lady herself. Irene drifted on with the

tide, content that in his presence she could forget the dark past; the thought never came to her that she was sweeping on, as a leaflet in the stream, toward a precipice. While with him she never once remembered the hidden skeleton—the page of the dark past that was never to be read by human eyes.

It spoke volumes for Irene's innate purity of mind that no thought save that of friendship filled her mind.

She realized only this, when they were together she cared for no other society. If she did not see him for a day, that day seemed strangely dull.

Oh! foolish, beautiful hours, spent among the roses, reading legends from the old masters, and poetry from the world's gifted poets, and discussing them. Oh, beautiful summer evenings spent over the piano or harp. Irene never thought of the time when they must cease.

The duchess watched in silence; she could not clearly make out whether Irene cared for Frederick Esmond or not.

This same uncertainty filled the mind of Esmond himself. He only awaited the right opportunity of declaring his love. He had told himself over and over again that he could not live without her; that every wish and hope of his life was centred in her. He would have told her so long since, but that she frightened him; he had so much at stake he feared to risk all. What if she should send him away as she had sent young Ross? still,

> "He either fears his fate too much,
> Or his deserts are small
> Who fears to put it to the touch
> To win or lose it all."

At length, telling himself he could endure the suspense of uncertainty no longer, Esmond determined to settle his future that very evening.

With this purpose in view he accepted an invitation to a tea given by the duchess.

As the evening passed, he was almost in despair; he could not find an opportunity of exchanging scarcely a word with Irene, everyone was always so eager to converse with her. She was charming in conversation, seeming intuitively to understand what topic each one preferred; discussing "high life" with Lady Aylmer, "home af-

fections " with a young bride, and " church politics " with Dr. Mead.

Esmond listened with charmed ears. How clever and brilliant she was, and asking himself doubtfully whether or not he would ever be fortunate enough to win this lovely, peerless girl, who might mate with a lord or a duke, if she so wished.

Much to his relief, the duchess joined the group and while their attention was attracted for a moment to her, Esmond managed to whisper to Irene: " Will you come out on the terrace, and see how the moon is shining?—resist it if you can."

She laid her little white hand on his arm, and they walked away together.

How beautiful the night was, the sky was ablaze with stars, the moon which was at the full, poured a flood of silvery radiance down upon the pretty fountains tossing up their white spray, upon the myriads of roses sweet mignonette and hyacinth whose odorous breath filled the summer air. It was like an evening in Southern Italy.

It was the very time and place for a declaration of love, but now that the all important moment had come Esmond felt as nervous as a school-boy.

Not one of the pretty speeches he had so carefully prepared came to his mind; his lips seemed almost stricken dumb.

" What a pity," said Irene, breaking the beautiful silence, " that summer could not last forever, it is so delightful. I cannot imagine why," she went on, " but this summer seems to me the fairest I have seen yet."

" I can say the same thing," he said, looking down into her dark, dreamy eyes.

Here was the opening he had been looking for, he caught the little hand in his, that lay on the cold stone brim of the fountain.

" Listen while I tell you *why* this summer has been the fairest I have ever known," he whispered,—" because it has been passed by your side, and because—I love you."

She drew back with a low cry of pain and amazement, snatching her hand from him, her eyes wide with something very like horror, and that look seemed to freeze the words on his lips; was ever a confession of love received in this fashion before?

CHAPTER XIII.

"DO NOT MAKE THE PAIN OF PARTING HARDER FOR ME TO BEAR."

FREDERICK ESMOND drew nearer the slim, girlish figure who stood so silently by the fountain—her face persistently turned from him. He was young and impulsive, with youthful blood bounding through his veins, and a warm heart beating in his breast. At that moment he would have bartered every dollar of his worldly possessions for love.

He well knew that there were very few of the belles thereabouts who would have refused him, titled, wealthy, self-confident and winning, worth a million of money in his own right, yet he trembled with suspense before this fair, young girl.

"Irene, have I frightened you?" he asked, humbly. "I thought you knew—that you understood—I cared for you. I loved you from the first moment I saw you."

"Hush!" she cries, in such a startled voice, that he pauses and looks around to see what has frightened her so.

"Oh don't Mr. Esmond—don't say any more," she falters, piteously, "I *could not* marry you—I—Oh, you must not ask me." The sentence dies away in a gasp on her white lips, she pauses in abject terror. Ah, Heaven! how near she had come to divulging the hidden secret that was locked in her breast, crushing her young life out with its dread weight.

"Why may I not?" he demanded, endeavoring to clasp the little white hand lying so dangerously near his own on the stone rim of the fountain.

Her sharp cry of distress, and the strange expression which had flashed so suddenly into the great, dark eyes embarrassed him in spite of all his easy nonchalant grace and self-assurance. His handsome face flushed, he was

almost at a standstill as to how to proceed with his wooing when her face was turned so persistently from him in something very like dismay.

"I thought we were friends, only that and nothing more," she murmured, incoherently, adding slowly:—"There can never be any love between us—only friendship."

"Friendship," he repeated, striving manfully to crush the great disappointment that almost overpowered him. "There can be no such thing as friendship, Miss Middleton, after *love* has once entered the heart. Could I look into your eyes, feel the touch of your little hands and simply crave your friendship? No, a thousand times no! Do not be angry at my presumption, Irene," he cried, "if I tell you that I believe that you *do* care for me and you are only trying to tease me. Look into my face and tell me you will not send me away."

Irene shrunk from his outstretched arms with a low cry. "Oh, if he only knew the truth," the tortured young heart sighs to itself. "Would he not despise me if he knew that I am already bound by a cruel tie to another, and that other, one whom I abhor from the depths of my soul, and like a flash the sudden thought struck her heart keen as a sword thrust—of the sweet possibilities that might have been, if she were only free. God pity her; all too late the startling truth forced itself to her whirling chaotic mind;—she loved Frederick Esmond. Oh, the pity of it all; what had she done, that fate should weigh down her young life with such heavy, galling chains. Yes, she loved him with the depth of love that comes to a woman but once in a lifetime, and they were parted just as surely as though one of them lay in the grave. Would it be with Esmond as with the hero of whom Robert Burns sang so plaintively? The lover who bade farewell to her whom he loved, and turned away murmuring as he parted from her:—

Ae fond kiss and then we sever!
Ae fareweel, alas! forever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee;
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.
Who shall say that fortune grieves him,
While the star of hope she leaves him?

But to see her was to love her,
Love but her, and love forever.
Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met—or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

Fare thee weel, thou first and fairest!
Fare the weel, thou best and dearest!
Thine be ilka joy and treasure,
Peace, enjoyment, love, and pleasure!
Ae fond kiss, and then we sever!
Ae fareweel, alas! forever!

"Will you take time to think this matter over, Irene?" pleaded Esmond, earnestly, "I will be very patient if you will but give me hope."

She shook her head, with a gesture of entreaty.

"I pray you to say no more," she faltered, "it can never be—never!"

"Will you answer me one question truthfully and in all solemnity, Irene?" he asked, gravely.

"If I can," she replied, in a voice from which she vainly attempted to repress the sobs.

"Will you deny that you care for me?"

"No—I—will not—" she answered, faintly.

"Then *why*, Irene, are you sending me from you?" he questioned, earnestly.

She bowed her head on her hands and he saw the slender frame shiver as with sudden chill.

"I do not know your reason for such a course, Irene," he went on, "but I say to you that whatever it is, it is not strong enough to compensate for the wrecking of two lives. It is cruelty to part us when we love each other."

"Do not make the pain of parting any harder for me to bear," she said, "you torture me."

He stepped back, the light died from his eyes, the tenderness from his fair, handsome face.

"I plead for your love and you call it torture," he said, slowly, "surely, you cannot mean those words."

"I do," she responded, piteously.

"Then I will go away," he replied; "I will tease and torture you no more. Perhaps some time in the future you may recall me, Irene. You may realize how deeply and truly I have loved you and will always love you. No

one in this world will ever care more for you, more than I do; it would be impossible. Farewell!—Irene."

He caught the little, white hand and held it one moment in his, drinking in the fair, young beauty of her face as though it would be engraven on his heart forevermore; then turned away, leaving her standing alone by the murmuring fountain, surely the saddest object the cold, bright moonlight ever fell on.

"I cannot return to the drawing-room just yet," she murmured, hoarsely, "the warm, perfumed air would stifle me. I must have air, freedom."

She hurried through the pleasure-grounds—through the coppice. No human being was near, but the birds were soon startled by the passionate cries of a broken heart, cries that fell freely and clearly on the soft, sweet air, and seemed to rise to the very face of the blue heavens—bitter, passionate cries that took with them the burden of a most unhappy soul,—crying out that she had sent from her the only man she could ever love.

"Irene—Irene," she fancied she heard a voice calling. She raised her dark head from the daisy studded grass where she had flung herself in the abandonment of her grief, and listened. "Irene," called the voice again, "where are you?" It was the duchess' voice.

"I am here," answered Irene, "did you want me?"

"I have been searching everywhere for you," answered the duchess. "I fancied I heard voices, I must have been mistaken. I have quite startling news for you, my dear," she went on, quickly, "the prison in which that fellow Forrester—who was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for robbing banker Middleton's safe—was confined, has been burned to the ground. All London is greatly exercised over the intelligence, and thousands are flocking to the scene of conflagration. Of course all the prisoners attempted to escape, but the flames drove them back—but very few broke through the intense heat of the crumbling walls. There was a long list of the dead—Forrester's name heads the list. His last act was dastardly:—those watching below through the red flames and black, blinding smoke saw him hurl a fellow prisoner down into the seething furnace of death that the additional weight of the other might not break the tough tendrils of the vine through which he intended to swing him-

self down to safety. The death-cry of the poor man was horrible to hear. I am right glad Forrester did not profit by his dastard cruelty,—still, it is said, self-preservation is the first law of nature. He met quick retribution, this Forrester."

Irene spoke no word, she stood as silent and motionless as a marble statue. The very heart in her bosom seemed to break with one awful throb. The marble fountain with its white clytie tossing up the silver spray; the grand old trees with their swaying branches; the roses lying asleep in the moonlight, and the duchess standing near her,—all seemed to whirl around her. Only Heaven saved her from falling down, dying at the duchess' feet.

Dead!—Leon Forrester—was—dead. The rippling waters of the fountain seemed to murmur it; the rustling leaves of the trees to whisper it. Her heart echoed it—*dead!*—then she was—*free.* He could never come and claim her—this man whom she abhorred.

"I cannot stay one moment," continued the duchess, "Miss Marchmount is waiting for me in the drawing-room to practice a duet with her. Don't stay too long out here in the moonlight, Irene," she said, brightly, "or I shall be obliged to send out some one of your admirers to bring you in."

With these words she flitted away. It did strike her as rather strange that Irene had made no comment concerning the burning of the prison, and Forrester's terrible death, but then Irene was not like other girls. With this thought she dismissed the subject from her mind.

In the grounds she met Esmond, pacing up and down, apparently enjoying the companionship of a cigar. How moody his face was, and haggard.

The duchess stole upon him unawares, laughing at the startled expression that crossed his face as she tapped his arm with her fan.

"Irene is in the grounds, down this path," she said; "perhaps *you* can coax her to come into the house; will you try? I have failed, and most ignominously."

CHAPTER XIV.

"I FIRMLY BELIEVE LOVE COMES TO A HEART BUT ONCE IN A LIFETIME."

FREDERICK ESMOND bowed to the lady with a grave smile, as she concluded her request.

"My dear duchess," he said, gallantly, "it would be impossible for *me* to meet with success if *you* have failed, though I will find Miss Middleton, and do my best to persuade her to accompany me to the drawing-room."

"You can certainly do no more," responded the duchess, glad of even the most trifling excuse. Esmond turned hastily and retraced his steps through the grounds in search of Irene.

When the duchess had left her, Irene had sunk down upon the nearest garden-bench, white, and trembling like a flower in a storm.

"Free!" she repeated, "I am free; all in a moment the fetters that bound me have fallen from me; I—I—can hardly realize that the man who cursed and wrecked my young life is dead!—and I—am—free!"

Not that she rejoiced that a human life had been sacrificed; on the contrary, with all a woman's gentle pity, she felt sorry for him, criminal though he was, even while she thanked Heaven that the ties that bound her to this man were severed forever.

"But my freedom has come to me *too late*," she sobbed. She did not hear the hurried footsteps coming over the green lawn; she did not see Frederick Esmond approaching, not even when he stopped short, almost beside her, for she had buried her face in her slim, white hands and was weeping passionate tears.

The words that fell from her lips caused Esmond to stop suddenly; to stop and listen with an expression of half-bewildered joy on his face.

"It is all over," she said, "all over; and he will never

know how much I cared for him. Oh, it was hard—bitterly hard—to send away from me the only man I can ever love. He will never know that he is all the world to me; that I would give my life for him. He will think me proud and cold, always; he will never know the truth. My dream is ended; Frederick and I have parted forever! If it were in *this* moment that he was kneeling at my feet, I would clasp his hand and cry out—'do not leave me; I cannot live without you.'"

She raised her head, and a startled cry fell from her lips, for Frederick Esmond was standing beside her!

"You cannot take back your words, Irene," he cried, with a low, happy laugh; "you have said you loved me; you can never unsay it, again. How I shall always bless the duchess for sending me through the grounds to bring you back to the house. At first, I hesitated, but the longing to plead my cause just once more with you overpowered me; and, standing there, I heard you, my darling, say words which have made me the happiest man on the face of the earth. You do care for me; you regretted sending me from you."

How her hands trembled in his strong, firm clasp; she tried to draw them from him but he would not release them.

"I shall not let you go until you have given me my answer, Irene," he said. "Do you bid me go—or stay? remember this is final, if you send me from you this time, it is—forever."

Could she send him from her when she loved him so well? There was a great, sharp struggle in her heart, for one moment that seemed the length of eternity to the anxious lover standing there.

Can we, who know her story, blame her for answering then and there, when the happiness of all the future was at stake, "Stay, Frederick." And those two words were the first link in the cruelest tragedy that was ever enacted.

There was a moment of silence, too sweet, too tender, it seemed, to be broken. The fragrant odor of the nodding roses near where they sat seemed to enfold them, the twinkling lights among the green foliage gleamed softly on their happy faces.

At that moment the thought occurred to Irene to tell

him of Leon Forrester, and what he had been to her; but she shrunk timidly from the ordeal; some other time she would tell him, not now.

The next words that fell from his lips decided her that it would be embarrassing to tell him just yet.

"Irene," he said, "you have made me supremely happy; you must add one more kindness; do not let any of your admirers come near you again. I am jealous; I admit it candidly; it is the one curse of the race of Esmonds, deep-rooted jealousy; I cannot help it. If I see you surrounded by fops and dudes, I know I shall feel like coming up to you and taking your hand before them all and saying:—she is mine, flatter, woo, covet, as much as you will, she is mine! you have not the least chance of winning her. I could not bear to see you even smile upon another, Irene, you must save them all for me, I know well that you have never cared for any one else," he went on, eagerly; "that is the one exultant thought of my heart; were it otherwise, I should never know one happy hour."

The lovely face blanched to a dead white, he little knew why. "I have strange thoughts perhaps," he went on, thoughtfully, "different from the thoughts of most men. I have always had my ideal as to the kind of a young girl I should marry: I must be her first and only lover; the hand of the woman whom I lead to the altar shall not have lain in any other lover's clasp, her face been studied by any other lover's eyes."

A slight gasp broke from her pale lips but he did not notice it.

"Suppose that I had had a lover and he had died," she faltered, "wouldn't you have cared for me, knowing it?"

She asked the question, trying to speak lightly, yet, despite the effort her sweet voice quivered piteously, and she bent forward breathlessly to catch his answer, which was to decide whether she should ever tell him of Leon Forrester or seal her lips with eternal silence.

"Do you know what I should do in such a case, Irene?" he replied, "I should have gone away, for I firmly believe love comes to a heart but once in this life and once only: yes, I should be jealous of any other lover, even though he lay in his grave."

"But," persisted Irene, "supposing I had never loved him?"

"It would be most unnatural to suppose that, for no true woman would betroth herself to a man *under any circumstances* unless she loved him."

Then and there Frederick Esmond lost all chance of ever learning the truth, until the bitter end came.

"I do not know why we should discuss a subject of this kind," laughed Esmond; "especially in such an hour as this; we have more weighty matters to talk over. The supreme subject now, Irene, is, how long shall I have to wait before I can claim you? Tell me, dear, when you will marry me. There need be nothing to cause a long delay; when will you be my wife?"

At the mention of the words "my wife," she sunk back with a low cry. Over the nodding roses a dark, evil face seemed to suddenly rise and confront her and the moustached lips seemed to utter the words, "my wife."

The shock was terrible to her; why should Leon Forrester's face haunt her at such a time?

"Have I frightened you again, Irene?" asked her lover, with a smile, "surely there is nothing so very terrible in the words; it is not such a hard question to answer."

There was no barrier between them; they were free to wed and they loved each other so well, but still, even though she had no respect for Leon Forrester's memory, though she had been his bride in name only, she must not wed Frederick Esmond under the allotted time, one year hence, and she told him that it could not be until summer came again.

"A *year!*" exclaimed Esmond, in consternation, "surely you do not mean it, Irene; you could not be so cruel, I will not wait a year;" but Irene was firm.

"If I am not worth waiting for, Frederick," she said, with a lovely blush, "I am not worth having."

"You are worth waiting a lifetime for, dear," he said; "but to tell you the truth I do not see any reason for such delay. I am called away upon business, Irene. I am obliged to be travelling about the continent for the next few months and I hoped to take you with me as my wife."

"I will write to you, faithfully, Frederick," she said, "be content with that."

"Letters are a poor substitute for the society of one whom we love," he said, earnestly; "and, besides, I should be spending all my time writing to you."

Irene was not to be persuaded. She was firm in her declaration that she would not marry him under a year, at least.

"I will say no more about it, now," thought Esmond, content with the promise he had gained thus far; "but when Christmas rolls around I will do my best to have the ceremony performed then, that will make Irene my bride."

The duchess learned that evening of Irene's betrothal.

"I am glad your future is settled, my dear," she said, patting the girl's dark, curly head, "I was really afraid you were going to be an old maid."

"There was no danger of that," murmured Irene.

"Oh no, certainly not; where a pretty girl like yourself is concerned, unless you would have been one from choice."

CHAPTER XV.

"UNHAPPY IS THE BRIDE THE RAIN FALLS ON."

"I CONGRATULATE you most heartily, my dear," continued the duchess, "you will be very happy with Frederick Esmond; you are so suited to each other; I thought it would end this way from the first. There was a fate in it. I will quote you the lines I used to spend much time conning over when I was a young girl: —

'Two shall be born the whole wide world apart
And speak in different tongues and have no thought
Each of the other's being and no heed;
And these o'er unknown seas to unknown lands
Shall cross, escaping wreck, defying death;
And all unconsciously, shape every act
And bend each wandering step to this one end,
That, one day, out of darkness they shall meet
And read life's meaning in each other's eyes.'"

"A beautiful poem," said Irene, thoughtfully, "but do you know the second verse always attracted me most,"— and she repeated slowly those lines so sad and, alas, so true :—

"And two shall walk some narrow way of life
So nearly side by side, that should one turn
Ever so little to the left or right
They needs must stand acknowledged face to face;
And yet, with wistful eyes that never meet,
And groping hands that never clasp, and lips
Calling in vain to ears that never hear,
They seek each other all their weary days,
And die unsatisfied—and this is fate!"

"Never look on the dark side of the picture," said the duchess, brightly,—"it isn't a good plan. If you look for sad and gloomy things, they are sure to come to you —put them from you."

Irene profited by the duchess' kindly advice. She put

all thoughts of the dark past from her, saying to herself, that she would regard it as though it had never been or as though it were some hideous dream.

The first time she had wedded because she had blindly believed it to be her uncle's wish, even when the bridegroom selected was abhorrent to her; now she would marry to please herself.

Then and there Irene made a solemn resolve—the most fatal mistake of her life—she told herself that, come what would, she would never reveal the secret of the past to the man she was about to wed. No human being knew of it save the old minister who had wedded her to Leon Forrester. It was not likely that he would ever come up as a witness against her. The dark secret of that marriage should be buried from the world forever, in Leon Forrester's grave. What Esmond did not know, would never make him unhappy.

Quickly the days flew by, and the arrangements for the wedding went steadily on.

Irene often thought of that other wedding which was but a mockery of the holy marriage-tie, with a shudder; she remembered how Leon Forrester had taken her into the dim, old church, dressed as she was for the street; and how shocked he had been when he discovered her dress was of *black crape*. She was not superstitious; but, ah,—what black, horrible disgrace and bitter trouble had followed.

Winter had sped quickly by and summer with its soft winds and tender blossoms came again.

Esmond had passed much of that time travelling on the continent in the interest of his business, and Irene remained with the duchess.

As Esmond had declared he should do, he spent the greater portion of his time writing letters to his lady-love. It often seemed laughable to the duchess when she wondered what he could find to fill up four closely-written pages with, almost every other mail. No doubt it was the same old story—old, yet forever new and sweet to lovers.

"I should think you would find it an arduous task answering so many letters, Irene," the duchess would often laughingly declare—"you certainly require the services of a secretary who is quick with the pen."

And then it was decidedly amusing too, to see Irene

ous phrases as enthusiastic young girls are wont to indulge in, at anything that delights them.

And well they might be enthusiastic for there never was a lovelier bride.

> "A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
> And most divinely fair."

There was a feverish glow on the rounded, dimpled cheeks and the dark eyes were as bright as stars.

Nannette, her maid, knew that she was greatly agitated for the little hands that grasped the bridal bouquet were burning hot through the dainty white kid gloves; but then, that was very natural, for, just before the ceremony on her bridal morn, is the most important epoch of a young girl's life.

Irene's heart sunk as she looked out of the window and noted the darkening sky.

Was it a forecast of what her future would be? ah, surely not, and she turned away from the window with a shudder, her face paling like a snow-drop.

The ceremony was to take place at two o'clock sharp, it wanted a quarter to that time now.

Already the guests were becoming impatient in the spacious drawing-room.

Suddenly some one looking from the window saw a horseman ride up to the front door and hurriedly dismount. And a moment later a note was slipped quietly into Frederick Esmond's hands as he was coming hurriedly down the broad corridor.

And even while he read it, his face growing strangely troubled, a *coupé* drove up to the door from which a gentleman alighted, and was ushered very quietly into the house.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT THE STRANGER READ IN THE MORNING'S PAPER.

HERE, and now, we must digress in our story, dear reader, and return to the scene of the prison conflagration that had startled all London a few months previous, and in which many a brave and noble fireman had lost his life. Many a pedestrian too, had lost his life by the burning timbers which the high wind carried great distances, their bodies being found in close proximity, the next morning when day broke.

In the little town of Glen Haven, some distance down the Thames, a few hours later, Dr. Rodman sat over a late breakfast, scanning over the London morning paper as he sipped his coffee.

He was startled by a sudden and imperative peal at the surgery door, and wondered, half impatiently, who wanted him. He had no patients in danger, and none who required so early a morning visit.

"A man to see you, doctor," said the little maid, popping her head in at the door of the breakfast-room.

Dr. Rodman closed his paper with a sigh; that was always the way, he was generally interrupted when he got deeply interested in an article, he told himself.

Entering his surgery, he found a man standing by the window, who turned quickly upon his entrance, giving him a quick, scrutinizing glance from a pair of keen, dark, piercing eyes.

In turn the doctor scrutinized the stranger. It was not often strangers came to the little village of Glen Haven. The doctor noted that his visitor was tall and slim, wearing a suit of exceedingly bad-fitting, shabby clothes; the doctor himself was extremely fastidious on this particular point.

"Are you Dr. Rodman?" inquired the stranger.

The doctor bowed.

"I have a slight wound here I should like you to dress," he said, baring his arm.

The doctor started. "Why, this is by no means a trifling affair," he said; "your arm has been burned almost to the bone; you must be enduring excruciating torture."

"It is decidedly inconvenient, and a *little* painful," admitted the stranger, setting his white teeth together hard in a grim smile, as the doctor commenced his operations.

"One could imagine you had passed through a recent fire," pursued the doctor. "Ah, I am right, your clothing is singed too. May I ask if it was at the great prison fire in London, the papers are full of?"

"Your surmise is quite correct, my dear sir," responded the stranger, with a haughty air of nonchalance. "I have just come from London, and I was so unfortunate as to be struck by a piece of burning timber. My coat sleeve was entirely burned away, I was furnished this garment by a friend."

"Ah! that accounted for the ill-fitting coat."

"A fearful loss of life," commented Dr. Rodman.

"Yes."

"I wonder if any of the convicts escaped? There seems to be considerable controversy over the point; they claim everybody to a man has been found, or accounted for." A sudden gleam shot into the stranger's eyes.

"Is the full account—all the particulars—in this morning's paper?" he asked, vainly striving to appear calm.

"Yes," replied Dr. Rodman.

"Can I be permitted to glance over it?" inquired the stranger.

"Certainly," responded the doctor, courteously, and a moment later he placed the paper in his hand, and proceeded dressing the painful swelling arm, and bandaging it.

The man gave a quick start, and a gasp, and something like an imprecation burst from his lips. Glancing up the doctor saw that the man's gaze was fixed intently upon the paper.

The stranger had read breathlessly every syllable of the account: it was when he had come to the list of those known to be killed outright, and whose bodies had been found, that he gave that sudden start. The list was

headed with the name of Leon Forrester, and beneath were the words—"face burned beyond recognition; identity established by a deep red, triangular scar over the breast."

A score or more of times the stranger read that paragraph; it seemed to hold a peculiar, subtle attraction for him, and something very like malignant triumph gleamed in his black eyes.

"Well, Leon Forrester," he muttered, "if you lost your life in that fire, you are certainly dead to the world. What a cry there will be raised among your enemies about retribution—Bah!"

He ran his keen eye further down the column. The article closed with an item of later news. It had been ascertained that several of the prisoners must have escaped and Scotland Yard detectives would be put on their trail, at once; their capture was only a question of time.

A curious whiteness spread over the stranger's face as he read that.

The arm was bandaged and then the stranger admitted frankly to the doctor that he was entirely without funds.

"It did not occur to me before that my wallet was in the breast pocket of the burning coat I tore off and flung from me," he said, "until this very moment. I shall be obliged to remit the amount later on."

"At your convenience," responded Dr. Rodman. What else could he say? very courteously he bowed his visitor out.

"An odd specimen of man that,—with the manners and bearing of a lord in a laborer's garb. I suppose that is another hour's labor given to sweet charity," and he ruminated crossly over the fact that people generally paid the tradespeople's bills but always imagined the doctor could wait. Three-fourths of his outstanding bills he never expected to collect, which caused him to be worrying most of his time as to how both ends would be made to meet; expenses always ran on, whether money rolled in or not. Meanwhile the object of his thoughts hurried down the grass-grown village street, turning out of his way many a time to avoid meeting a pedestrian.

He reached the bank of the river where he had left a small skiff.

"If I could but get back to London again," he mut-

tered. "It is all very well to float down with the tide, but, rowing back with a boat, with this arm disabled, is practically out of the question. There is no other way than to tramp it back, though it is fraught with danger at every step.

It was almost dusk of a sultry afternoon three days later that he entered London.

"A daring stroke," he muttered—"daring to come here, but it had to be done."

By a circuitous route, he made his way to a shop in rather a dismal locality which bore above the door a sign which read,

HENRI LATOUR. HUMAN ARTIST.

Rather strange words to those who did not understand the nature of monsieur's business. The man was a genius in his way. His shop was famous from one end of London to the other. If a gentleman met with an accident discoloring his face, cutting part of his lip, and damaging an eye and eyebrow, in less than an hour's time the skilful human artist bowed the gentleman out of his parlors, quite as good as new; the discolored face was carefully painted to blend perfectly with his complexion, a flesh colored plaster skilfully fitted in, and a false eyebrow, so carefully adjusted that even his best friends could never have detected that there was anything amiss with him. Hence monsieur's world-renowned fame for his skill.

Monsieur was standing in his door-way puffing a cigar—an excellent one, by the way, the stranger noted, as he stepped past him into the establishment.

Sizing-up his visitor in one rapid glance, Monsieur Latour concluded that the man had little money to pay for his services, if he required them.

The stranger deliberately threw off a bandage he had worn upon his face, and tilted back the broad felt hat he wore, turning about and coolly meeting Latour's eye.

"*You!*—by all that is merciful!" cried the artist, shrilly "you—"

"Never mind mentioning names," interrupted the stranger, grimly; "we have been old and true friends too long not to have remembered *that*."

"I am astounded—nonplussed! I have just been read-

ing of the great prison fire and that—ah, here is a customer; step into that little private laboratory of mine to the right, first door, and I will be with you almost immediately."

"He—of all men in the world," muttered the Frenchman, as the stranger turned away. By all that is merciful, I thought it was his ghost, rising suddenly up before me."

It was quite an hour ere the artist finished with his customer, and hurriedly sought his laboratory.

"He has *gone*," he muttered, "and of course helped himself to anything here, he fancied; well, it could not be helped."

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CHAPTER XVII.

I CANNOT REMEMBER WHERE I HAVE SEEN THAT STRANGER BEFORE.

THE room into which the stranger was ushered was a long, narrow apartment where the curtains were always closely drawn by night and by day lest by chance some passing pedestrian should pause by the window and glance in at this chamber of horrors and wonders combined.

It had every appearance of a dissecting room; false limbs, hands, arms, and teeth, lay scattered promiscuously about; beards of every size and color, and on sombre black pads, an eye, so human in its expression, as it glared up at the intruder, or beseeching in its agonized expression, as to fairly stagger and paralyze one.

The stranger glanced eagerly about him, taking in every detail of the apartment in a keen, instantaneous survey. He was equally busy with his hands. Wig after wig was tossed over in quick succession.

"I see nothing that would answer," he muttered, with a ground out imprecation; "nothing at all. I shall have to place myself in Latour's hands, and there never was a more dastardly traitor; he would betray his own brother if he saw that a big stake could be obtained by it,—Ah!"

His eyes had rested upon a small vial containing a whitish liquid, and bearing a lengthy label in Latour's handwriting. "It's action is immediate," he repeated, "exactly what I require; as a general thing these applications take a week or more to accomplish their purpose."

Some twenty minutes later, a figure stole hurriedly out of the side-door of Latour's laboratory, taking care to close the spring-locked door noiselessly and securely after him.

Few experts would have recognized in the golden haired stranger—boasting of a luxurious blonde mus-

tache, and whose fair hair clustered about his temples in a way that would have charmed an artist—who issued forth on to the busy London streets, as the same dark man with cleanly shaven face and closely cropped dark hair, who had recently entered Latour's shop; even his clothing had undergone a radical change. He had helped himself to the Frenchman's best suit, which he had found in an unlocked wardrobe.

"With Latour ignorant of what my disguise really is, I can feel tolerably safe in mingling once more with my fellow-men," and a laugh fell from his lips that was not pleasant to hear.

As is the habit of many a man, Monsieur Latour made the mistake of leaving his well-filled wallet very often in his coat pocket. The stranger benefitted by that carelessness now.

Hailing a hansom-cab, he gave orders to be driven at once to the nearest *café* and to be waited for there.

The waiter in the *café* was amazed at the order given by the stranger.

"He ordered everything," the waiter said to the *chef;* "saying, 'Be sure and bring enough'; when it was set before him he ate ravenously; one would think to see him, he had not tasted food for many a day."

The stranger's keen ears overheard this dialogue, "Heavens!" he muttered, savagely, "in all things one must guard against ill-appearances, not to lay one's self open to—suspicion. He paid his bill hurriedly, and left the *café*, with a mind restless and ill at ease, "To Hyde Park," he gave order, as he re-entered the cab. When some little distance from there he dismissed the cabman and set out to make the rest of his journey on foot.

Evidently he had not far to go for as he reached the Middleton mansion, he stopped short, glancing furtively around, then at the closed windows of the house with apprehension.

A young woman stood near the entrance gate, tying up the branches of a flowering bush.

The stranger had evidently seen this young person before, for he recognized her at once as the gardener's comely daughter.

"A very pretty bush," he observed, "those roses must have a specific name; may I ask what it is?"

"Jacqueminot roses," the girl answered, "but goodness gracious me," she went on, observing the fair-haired, handsome stranger, with a simper and a giggle, "if you think *these* roses are nice you ought to see those in the other part of the grounds; why the whole park is a wilderness of roses."

"This is a very fine place," he remarked; "I should like to live here."

"Why don't you apply for the assistant-gardeners' place?" she suggested, eagerly; "he's going to leave next week. It's awfully quiet here now, though. It would be a splendid place for you."

The stranger looked at his white hands with a cynical laugh.

"I would not care for such employment," he said, with a contemptuous sneer; "it's not to my liking."

"Oh, that's it, is it," the girl retorted, with a pert toss of her yellow head, "that's what most of us would like, I fancy, to be lords and ladies of leisure—with plenty of the needful: but when our pocket says 'no,' we have to buckle to. But *I* needn't have been out to service, unless I wanted to, she went on, with a simpering giggle; "there was a right smart young tradesman wanted me, but I wouldn't have him; oh, dear, no; and then there was an old bachelor who was just crazy for me to be Mrs. Tim Tourtelott; but I sent him about his business, quick. You do me very proud, sir, says I, but do you think I'd be fool enough to marry a man old enough to be my grandfather? No, I guess not. The idea of an old man shying around a young girl; so foolish as to imagine she *could* fancy him. When *I* marry, I want a handsome young man."

Not one word of the girl's chatter had been heard by the stranger; his thoughts were elsewhere, and he cut short her remarks by asking abruptly: "Who lives here?"

"Only the servants," she answered. "The family's all broke up."

"How?" he asked, and the glittering eagerness in his eyes aroused the girl's curiosity.

"Did you know them, sir?" she asked.

"No,—oh—no!" he answered, carelessly.

"The house is closed," went on the loquacious girl, delighted at having a ready listener, and that, too, a very handsome young man. "Most of the servants stay at the lodge; they won't sleep over night in the house, for there was a murder committed in the east room; and they do say, at midnight, the ghost of the murdered man haunts the place." An uneasy shiver ran through the stranger's frame.

"But the other members of the family; where are they?"

"There was no other member save Miss Irene," responded the girl; "and she left London very suddenly, vowing she had shaken the dust of it from her feet, forever, and that she should never return—never!"

"You have no idea where she went?"

"Nobody knows that, sir," the girl responded; wondering at the evident interest he displayed in Miss Middleton's movements, adding "I would know if any one hereabouts did, for I used to be her maid."

"Ah!"

"Did you speak, sir?"

"No—no; pray proceed," he murmured, hoarsely. "Was she happy when she went, or—or—unhappy?"

She seemed glad to go. Why for weeks and weeks before that, she would pace the flour half of the night, sobbing and wringing her hands; crying out that her life had been wrecked and her future spoiled. Of course it must have been on account of her uncle, sir; the man who was murdered. Miss Irene was awfully fond of him. She was a very sweet and gentle young lady, was Miss Irene. There was only one person on earth whom she loathed, and that was the man who killed the old banker, Leon Forrester."

"You say she hated him," said the stranger, a dull, slumbering fire creeping into his eyes. "How do you know, pray?"

"I've heard her say so. 'Katy,' she has said to me, many a time, 'I abhor even that man's memory. I would rather *die* than be brought face to face with him again.' On the day he was sentenced to prison, she cried out that she wished it had been a life sentence he had got, or—death."

"Did she say that?" asked the stranger, hoarsely.

"Yes; and you can't blame her for it, either, poor girl, when you remember what he did."

The stranger turned on his heel without replying, and strode angrily away.

"So she hates Leon Forrester, does she?" he muttered, with a sardonic laugh, as he whipped off the heads of the tender, nodding blue-bells with his walking-stick as he hurried along.

The gardener's daughter looked over the hedgerow after him with pouting lips.

"He wheeled around and walked off without as much as saying, 'good-morning, Miss.' Perhaps he is some great lord or an earl or a duke, or something like that. Of course it isn't at all likely that I shall ever see him again, but, oh my, wasn't he handsome! and then with such an odd style; it isn't very often a man with fair hair and a blonde moustache has such midnight dark eyes."

And Katy turned to her rose-trimming again with a sigh, ever and anon glancing over her shoulder at the vanishing figure.

Suddenly it struck her that there was something decidedly familiar about that swinging stride as he hurried along.

"I cannot think just now if I have ever seen him before or not; but it will be sure to come back to my memory if I have, very shortly."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BOOK FELL FROM THE CLERGYMAN'S HAND WITH A CRASH AS HIS EYES TRAVELLED FROM THE GROOM TO THE FACE OF THE BRIDE.

"I SHALL find her if I have to search the whole world over to do it," muttered the stranger, as he hurried away from the gloomy Middleton mansion.

Who and what this man was, and why he was so vitally interested in finding Irene, we shall divulge a little later on.

He did not call at the detective bureau, to have a man detailed to assist in the search. This would have been widely at variance with his interests; he pushed his determined search alone to unearth some kind of a clew to her whereabouts; but at the end of a fortnight, he owned that he was baffled.

Even the young lady's bankers were ignorant of where she could be, it had been long months since she had drawn upon them. Somehow they had gained the impression, in some vague way, that she was in Paris.

To Paris the stranger journeyed at once, and there began his search anew.

Leaving him for the present, declaring though he spent days, months, or even years, just as sure as fate he would find her, *at last*, we will return to the object of his search, Irene, and her wedding-day, and to the note Frederick Esmond had just received and over which he stood pondering with knitted brows.

He immediately dispatched one of the servants in search of the duchess.

"What cannot be cured must be endured," he said, placing the note into her hands.

The duchess glanced over the note, hurriedly.

"Ah well! everything will go on smoothly," she said. "He has sent some one to fill his place. No doubt that

was the gentleman who descended from the *coupé* whom I saw from the drawing-room window."

Meanwhile, in the boudoir above the last touches were being given to the bride-elect's toilet.

"Did you tell her about the accident?" asked one of the young girls pushing through the group to Irene's side.

"Look how you have frightened her, Jess Reynolds!" reprimanded one of the bridemaids, severely. "The accident she tells about," she said, turning to Irene, is scarcely worth mentioning, it was simply this: The minister who was to perform the ceremony missed the boat, therefore, finding it impossible to reach here, telegraphed that he had sent on to another minister, his friend, to have him perform the ceremony in his stead. He has already arrived I believe."

"I have heard that it was a bad omen to have a change of ministers, or of bridemaids at a wedding," said Irene, shuddering; "I once knew of such a case and when the hour for the ceremony rolled around, the bridegroom was missing."

"That will not be *your* case," laughed Jessie, "for Frederick Esmond is pacing up and down the corridor with all the impatience of a school-boy, begging to see you at the earliest possible moment. There's devotion for you."

"You will have one of the handsomest of husbands, Irene," said one of the girls, in a whisper, "and what is better than all, he is marrying you for love alone. You ought to be so happy, dear, yet your face expresses—what shall I call it—something very like terror."

"It is only your fancy," murmured Irene, faintly, "why should I feel terror?"

"Why, nothing, only you look so."

It was like a strange, confused dream to Irene, when Frederick led her down the corridor and at the door, the duke took her arm and proceeded with her into the grand parlor where the guests were assembled.

A murmur of admiration rang through the vast throng. Was there ever a more gloriously fair bride, she seemed so childish, so dismayed.

As the duke led her up to the floral horseshoe beneath which the minister stood, and Frederick awaited her, by chance she raised her eyes to the clergyman's face. The wonder of it was that she did not fall down dead at his

feet then and there; the same clergyman who had wedded her to that other one on that fatal day, stood before her now.

She did not cry out; she did not swoon; she would have turned and fled precipitately if she could, but the door-ways and passages were blocked with people.

"Would the man recognize her? would his voice break the awful stillness by saying:

"I wedded this girl not so very long since to another, what of him?"

But he was old and feeble, he might not remember names or faces; besides, what had she in reality to fear, save scandal. That other one was dead, sleeping beneath the ruins of a convict's grave.

A lifetime of suspense was crowded into the moment that followed.

Ah! Heaven be praised, he did not look over closely at her drooping face.

Quietly the bridal pair took their places, and the ceremony, such a cruel mockery, went on.

Frederick made his responses in a clear, distinct, happy voice.

Then the minister turned to the bride-elect, and the words were asked slowly:

"Wilt thou, Irene Middleton, take this man to be thy lawfully wedded husband until death do ye part?"

How the wind moaned amid the branches of the trees outside, as though it knew and could understand a human soul was in deadly peril there and then.

Why did not the listening angels who guard the innocent stretch forth their hands to save her from the fate she was about to bring upon herself.

By a mighty effort, Irene controlled her dazed senses, answering in a low, clear voice, "I will."

There was a loud crash.

The clergyman's book had fallen from his hands to the floor.

He was leaning forward in a startled manner peering into the death-white face before him.

"That voice," he murmured, but not so low but what Irene heard it, and her soul sunk within her.

Would he denounce her?

How Frederick would turn from her in consternation,

and the guests would crowd about her to listen to her story; the clergyman would tell it, her lips would be stricken dumb. Some few might pity her, but the greater part would delight in so piquant a scandal. Ah, how could she bear it?

"It was my fancy, only my absurd fancy," she heard him murmur, as he stooped to recover his book, and the ceremony went on to the end.

No one looking at the fair bride would ever have imagined she had uttered just such solemn vows before. No wonder the face beneath the bridal veil grew whiter, and the sweet voice more faint.

It seemed to Irene the shaded light gave place to darkness; the roll of music, the sound of the clergyman's voice, came from afar off; a great dread came to her, lest in that, the moment of her life above all others, she was dying; there was a great rush as of many waters in her ears; the darkness grew deeper before her eyes. No one guessed that the beautiful young bride had almost fallen down dead at her bridegroom's feet.

Frederick's voice aroused her; he was whispering something, some sweet words that sounded like, "my darling wife."

People were crowding around her; the pretty bridemaids, in amber and white, were kissing her; the duchess was whispering kind congratulations; her young husband was looking with unutterable love into her face.

"Give me one smile, Irene," he said, "your face is quite colorless, are you ill?" (this very anxiously).

Irene made a desperate effort to recover herself, she must be gay, and beat back memory with a strong hand, for this was her *real* wedding day.

Still as in a dream she saw the gay dresses of the ladies blending in their charming variety of colors. One after another came to her and called her Mrs. Esmond. The minister who had just completed the ceremony added his congratulations.

Then it was time to enter the carriage.

They crowded round her in that moment of parting, how well she remembered it in the after days.

She saw kindly faces and heard friendly voices and good wishes.

The duchess wept as she bade her adieu. "I am

sorry to lose you, Irene," she said, "but I have no fear for you; you will be as happy as the day is long; you will know no care, no sorrow as Frederick Esmond's wife. Had I a beloved young sister of my own I could not have wished for her a better fate than that she should have married him. You are going out into the great world together, you will henceforth be all in all to each other, you will have a future all sunshine. Let me give you one little wee word of advice on this threshold of your honeymoon,—make a confidante of your husband in all affairs both great and small, and no shadow, no distrust, will ever creep between you."

Irene smiled pitifully, and kissed the Duchess.

"Come, my darling," said Esmond, clasping her hand, "we will be late for the boat."

Irene entered the carriage with her young husband and they were driven off midst a shower of rice and white slippers, and merry girlish voices wishing them all manner of happiness.

They had entered upon the new life stretching out before them that they were to spend together.

"What says thy song, thou joyous thrush
Up in the walnut tree?
'I love my love because I know
My love loves me.'"

CHAPTER XIX.

"I CANNOT ENDURE THIS DESOLATE LIFE MUCH LONGER."

THE happy bride and bridegroom had left care and trouble behind them. Never did life open so fairly. Frederick Esmond took his young wife directly to Paris. She must see something of the gay world before they went to their villa in Italy; he knew that everything would be a novelty to her there. He had travelled, but Irene had never quitted English shores; as he had expected, she was full of enthusiasm about everything she saw, and her husband was delighted with her happiness.

He took her wherever she expressed the slightest desire to go. He showed her the old Bastile, where so many hundreds of innocent people had undergone all the tortures of long imprisonment and death; the grand old Abbey of St. Denis, where sleep the most chivalrous race of men, the Kings of France; the grand old palaces where kings and queens had reigned, suffered, and enjoyed; the grand old trees that stood, serene and calm, although the kings that had admired them, and the queens who had loitered under their shade, had laid their heads on the block.

From gay Paris they went to Switzerland, visiting the very places over which Esmond had wandered, wearing his life out thinking of *her* in that past which he never liked to recall.

They found life there, a taste of Paradise. These newly wedded lovers enjoyed it to their hearts' content.

No place could have been more picturesquely beautiful than the Chateau at which they stopped, the terrace and grounds surrounding it were literally smothered with roses.

Flowers of every hue, of every description, of every variety of loveliness climbed the walls, peeped in at the windows, covered the iron railings, and climbed over the

doors. The scenery around was magnificent, the lake so clear and blue, the grand mountains in the distance covered with snow—eternally white and calm—and the green, lovely, sloping valleys.

It was beautiful to rise in the morning and breakfast while looking on the blue lake with its white sail-boats shining in the sunshine gliding across it.

Some years ago, the idea of remaining for any length of time in so quiet a spot—a chateau by a Swiss lake, with nothing but hills and mountains around—would have filled Esmond with dismay, but now he enjoyed it, love had transformed him.

They loved to see the sun set over the blue water, watch the moon rise pale and white, and watch the stars fix themselves in the blue heavens and mirror themselves in the lake below.

They were out one evening in a little row-boat, when for some time Irene had not spoken, but sat with her dimpled chin bent on one white hand, the other trailing idly in the limpid waves.

"Of what are you thinking, Irene?" asked Frederick, resting on his oars and looking into the beautiful dreamy face.

"I was thinking that I should like nothing better from life than this," she said, "and wondering if after all, Heaven can be much happier than earth. If I never had any more happiness in my life, I should still have had more than falls to the lot of most women."

"That is because you are in love, my dear," he said, gayly, "may it always live in your heart just so, Irene."

"Can true love ever die, Frederick?" she asked, suddenly, "I do not mean lover's love, but the love that lives between man and wife, such as you and I: tell me how it could die; in what manner—what fashion?"

"The difficulty would be rather to tell you how it lives than how it dies, so many things conspire to kill it. I must frankly admit that in most cases the husband is to blame. He grows tired of his wife; his own fervid love changes to indifference; she resent it; quarrels, dislike and hatred follow."

"That is a very cruel death for love to die," she said, with a faint, sweet sigh.

"Cruel but very common," he replied.

"Ours could never die in that fashion, could it, Frederick?" she asked.

For answer he drew her into the clasp of his arms and kissed her, holding her fast though she attempted to struggle out of his strong arms.

"Frederick, you forget all my warnings," she cried, blushing, terribly; "I have asked you to be so careful; I am sure that gentleman and lady on the pier know we are newly-married."

"Never mind them," said Esmond, complacently; "they do not have eyes in the back of their heads and their faces are turned the opposite way—still, I should not care in the least whether they were looking this way or not."

They sauntered back to the chateau in the moonlight, and neither of them in all the after-years of suffering and pain, ever forgot that evening and that scene.

They wandered on to Italy, that land of sunny skies—of music and of poetry, where they lingered many months; but one incident happened in all those long months of happiness to bring the haunting memory of the past back to her, with startling force.

It happened in this way:

Irene longed to take a villa on the banks of the Arno, and at length came across one that suited her artistic fancy, exactly. It was in a most picturesque little village, which stood where the river is widest, and where the great crags rise highest to the sky. A little tributary ran from it close by the villa, wandering off into the interior, being lost in the blue dimness of distant hill and sky. It was spanned at this point by an old rustic bridge; great trees shade the place, and the gray stone of which the villa is built, is half covered with ivy and moss.

"How strange it is to find so beautiful a spot uninhabited," cried Irene, enthusiastically; "the grounds are running riot with blossoms, the stone fence is crumbling, and the walls falling to decay: it is like the picture of ruined castles we have seen. See, how the path is overgrown with long grass, and climbing vines have woven a perfect net-work of briers over the door; the lock is rusty, too, as though it had not been opened for years."

"I am sorry you have taken such a fancy to that

place," said a lady friend, to Irene, when she confided to her her plans of securing the place. "It is very beautiful: but there are very few hereabouts who would enter those locked doors. The peasants are superstitious; they would go miles out of their way rather than pass the place at midnight. Artists love to go there and sketch the places, and romancers have written about it for long years. There is a legend connected with it. Sit down here, where we can have a good view of the place through the green branches of the trees, and I will tell you the legend:

"These old Italian villas and ruins have quaint legends about them, generally, but this, perhaps is the saddest. It is quite true, for it is vouched for in the annals of history. The place is a very old one you observe. The story runs that many, many years ago—somewhere in the beginning of the present century—the place was owned by a noble lord, who spent his days and his vast wealth in every possible manner human ingenuity could devise. The villa was always ablaze with lights and merry with guests. The revelry night after night from the grand old halls, made the welkin ring.

"At the age of fifty, the old lord found himself a bankrupt; the whole of his princely fortune had been spent in riotous living, squandered right and left. He woke up to find himself ruined in health, strength, and fortune; his hair had turned gray, his sight had grown dim, the high spirits and good-nature had all given place to a soured, cynical frame of mind.

"He set about looking for the only thing possible to retrieve his fallen fortune—a rich wife. Sad to say he found one, in the person of a young and lovely girl—a tradesman's daughter. The tradesman had amassed a magnificent fortune—his one remaining ambition was to see his daughter marry a title.

"In justice to the young girl, be it said that she was bitterly opposed to the union. She shrunk back in horror from the old lord when he was presented to her, for there was the memory of a handsome young lover whose pleading voice was still in her heart.

"Her father was firm; she must marry the old lord. His will had ever been her law, she could not disobey,

so, wild with despair, she wedded the old lord, and her heart seemed to die within her at the very altar.

"From the church the old lord brought his bride to the villa yonder, but though she brought him untold gold, the villa was never thrown open to gay guests again—never. On the contrary, a high stone wall he caused to be built about it, and the poor lady was never after seen by her friends again.

"The old lord was of an insanely jealous temperament, and his one thought by night and by day was to guard his beautiful wife so closely that never again should she look upon the face of the young lover whom she loved so well, and from whom she had been parted to become *his* bride.

"This enforced seclusion within those grim walls, seeing, hearing no one but the taciturn old lord, was death in life to the fair, young girl. The servants often heard her say, 'Kill me outright; it would be kinder far. I cannot live this life much longer—I cannot—Heaven knows I cannot!' But the old lord was deaf to her cries, and one summer night when the moon shone and the golden stars were thick in the sky; when the fireflies twinkled like diamonds in the long grasses, and the flowers sent forth their perfume, the tragedy which has not, and will never be forgotten hereabouts was enacted.

"The old lord had left the villa one day for a week's absence, and left the guardsmen—you are startled, and well you may be—yes, it had come to that; the noble lord employed guardsmen, who patrolled the grounds by night and by day to see that the poor unhappy lady did not make off.

"The old lord's horse fell lame when but a day's journey had been accomplished, and he was obliged to return home on foot for another horse. He arrived at the villa at midnight.

"'I shall see how well the guardsmen are performing their duty,' he said. 'When the cat is away the mice will play.'

"Very cautiously he stole into the grounds, opening the ponderous iron gate with his key, creeping in the shadow of the wall until he reached the western wing, in which my lady's rooms were.

"Not one of the guardsmen had he met; he was furious as he stood there planning out the punishment he should

mete out to them. He would learn them what it meant to be direlect in their duty, believing him to be far away.

"How placid the stone villa looked in the white, bright moonlight. My lady's windows were open; the night winds blowing the filmy lace curtains to and fro. Suddenly, as he gazed, the filmy curtain parted, and a young and handsome man stepped through the window out on to the balcony, my lady clinging to him, her arms about him with tears and kisses. And before the paralyzed old lord could recover from his surprise, the young man had swung himself down from the balcony by means of a wire rope, scaled the high wall, and had vanished.

"Mad with rage the old lord hurried to her chamber, and there a furious scene followed. My lady plead for mercy, but the old lord would not listen, would not heed her. Picking her up in his strong arms he hurled her bodily from the window, down, down, into the surging water below. She never rose again, nor was her body ever found.

"Soon after it was discovered that the handsome young man was my lady's only brother, who had been exiled from the country some time before for plotting treason against the King.

"The old lord, when he learned this, shut himself up in the villa, where they say he went raving mad, with the sound of the water in his ears as it washed the rocks at the base of the villa.

"The place fast fell into decay; dust lays thick in the beautiful rooms—no one ever stepped foot into them after the mad old lord died.

"His remorseful cries were terrible to hear in those last days:—'She should have told me the man was her brother,' he would cry, as he paced the floor night and day. 'When there are vital secrets between man and wife, trouble comes of it sooner or later, as sure as the sun shines.'"

CHAPTER XX.

THE SERPENT ENTERS THE GARDEN OF EDEN.

THE story had made a deep impression upon Irene, especially the closing words.

"It was a dastardly crime," commented Frederick, "it might all have been avoided if, as the old lord said, there had been no secrets between them; yes, trouble comes of it sooner or later."

Happening to glance casually at Irene's face, he saw that it was white as death. In a single instant great, dark circles had crept beneath her large, dark eyes and her hands were trembling like aspen leaves.

Before he could take one step forward, she had dropped at his feet in a deep swoon.

Esmond bore her quickly to her apartments; the signora who had related the story to them, following in apprehension.

There is no class of women who have stronger nerves than English women, this one seems to be an exception, however, she thought.

"The signora is very delicate," she said, in her mellow Italian voice, as she bent sympathizingly over her; "but this is something more than a mere fainting fit, I feel sure; you see the maids cannot bring her to."

"Let a doctor be summoned at once," said Esmond, distractedly, looking in alarm at the grayish pallor stealing slowly over the lovely face lying so still and white, against the pillow.

His order was executed at once. The young Englishman had plenty of gold, and was lavish in 'giving tips' as the servants phrased it, and they hastened to obey his command.

It seemed to Frederick, the physician was an age in coming, and as he bent over the still form his face grew grave; there was a look on it that struck terror to Esmond's heart.

"Is she in danger, doctor?" he cried; "tell me at once —I cannot bear suspense."

The doctor shook his head thoughtfully to and fro, he was not a man to answer rashly; and there was something about this fair young woman, stricken down so suddenly, who lay before him that warned him her's was no common illness. When he had administered restoratives, and the dark eyes had flashed suddenly open, there was a look in them he did not quite like, he read in them acute terror.

Esmond touched his arm again with a trembling hand. "You do not answer me, doctor," he said, "is it a malignant fever—a fatal disease?"

"No," responded the doctor, shortly, "nothing of that kind; the mind is diseased rather than the body. She has suffered a mental strain which has overpowered her at last; I believe she has been fighting hard against this insiduous foe for long months. Have you any clew to the cause of her deep depression?" he asked, turning to the wondering young husband.

"Depression!" echoed Esmond, "why you must be mistaken, doctor. What in Heaven's name is there to depress her spirits? We have been married but a short time; and since we have been married, she has never known one wish unfulfilled, we have been exceptionally happy, I thought."

The sage old doctor made no reply; but his face grew graver, more thoughtful. That some great, hidden sorrow prayed upon her mind, which her young husband knew not of, he firmly believed.

The next few days were painful ones indeed to Esmond, for Irene had grown much worse. Dr. Rienzi and two experienced nurses were in constant attendance now. Brain fever had set in and her life was despaired of.

Esmond scarcely ate or slept, his soul was in such a tumult of agony.

Hour after hour the doctor would sit quietly at his patient's bedside, listening abstractedly to the senseless babblings that fell from her lips.

"Such odd notions as the poor young lady has," the nurses would exclaim, laughingly to each other, "she is always crying out about some dark, revengeful face which she fancies has suddenly come between her and her

young husband, shutting him out from her gaze, forevermore."

One day as the doctor entered the sick room quite unexpectedly, his footfalls making no noise on the thick velvet carpet, he found both of the nurses bending over the patient with rapt attention.

He was just about to speak when the words that fell from their lips held him transfixed with curiosity.

Both had their backs turned toward him, consequently neither saw him.

"We will not disturb her," whispered one of the nurses; "while she sleeps I will make an examination of this little white hand which lies like a snow-flake on the coverlet. Much of one's life and temperament can be gleaned from the hand." Some little time elasped, still the nurse was studying the white, slim, restless hand she held, intently.

"Well," asked her companion at length, "what do you see there? To me it is nothing more or less than a very lovely white hand, but you appear to look grave over it."

"And well I may," returned the other, slowly. "I have read the lines of life on many hands, but I never saw them so strangely marked as they are in this. Do you see that line?" she said, pointing to a delicate line that was like a vein on a rose-leaf. "That is a fatal line; it is an abrupt ending of the marriage line, the same one, mind, goes on to the other end of the hand which means the end of life; and what puzzles me the most is following close beside it is *another* marriage line when *there is no line of death across the first marriage line.* As both lines are well to the left of the hand, that indicates the marriages will take place early in life. I should imagine the events had already taken place. If she has remarried, and the first husband is not dead, then there is but one conclusion, the poor girl has had recourse to the divorce court.

"Mind, this is not mere fancy; it is reading aright the lines of true science as I find them here. As some people make a study of human faces, so I have made a study of human hands. She will not have a happy life of it. There is dark and bitter trouble ahead of her; and as sure as the sun shines, it will end in a tragedy. Those

peculiar points at the end of the finger tips indicate it. Heaven forbid that many people should have such marks on their hand.

"Anne Boleyn, the ill-fated queen, had them; and one day, when she was a very young girl, a strolling phrenologist saw them and predicted what her future would be. She threw her pretty head back and laughed aloud; but, when the hour came when she was led forth to the gaze of the breathless multitude, and that beautiful head laid on the block, she thought of the old phrenologist's prediction. The lines on one's hand foretell the future as sure as fate; and I find plainly enough just what I have told you written on this one."

The doctor quietly retreated; he did not care to have the nurses know that he had overhead their remarks. He paced up and down the corridor some minutes, his brows knit in deep thought, and as he so paced the strange notion that appeared to haunt his beautiful patient's brain recurred to him; of the dark, revengeful face that floated before her, shutting out her young husband's face from her gaze forevermore.

The doctor believed he held the key to her fatal illness at last; but he was as far from helping her as ever. The secrets of her life were her own; no one had a right to pry into them.

Long and earnestly one of the nurses pondered over what her companion had told her.

"It is an ill wind which blows nobody good," she muttered, when she found herself alone; why shouldn't I make capital out of what I have heard, if it can only be true. I have nothing to lose anyhow; I may as well try." She set her wits cleverly together planning for this one end.

"She is just rolling in gold," she would often mutter as she paced the floor of her room—"why shouldn't she divide with me, if it be true that she has a secret to keep. If I could but stumble on the truth by some lucky chance."

She was a diplomatic woman; she bent all her arts to one aim—to ingratiate herself so completely in young Mrs. Esmond's favor, that when she left Italy, she should accompany her as her maid, and this object she readily accomplished.

"Of course you shall have your own way about it, my dear," said Esmond, some weeks later, as they were about to take their departure; "you always have that. But in this case, I hope you will stop and consider a little. I cannot say that I am favorably impressed with her. I do not like these low-browed women who creep about stealthily, casting furtive glances about under their lashes. Many a time when I have supposed we were alone together, happening to turn abruptly around, I have found that woman standing at my elbow."

"You exaggerate it, I am sure, dear," said Irene, laughingly. "If a woman is no longer quite young or pretty, men see all her faults and but few of her virtues; remember she saved my life—or rather helped to save it—that alone should be a deep claim on your gratitude."

"So it is, Irene," returned her husband—continuing, "If you wish to engage her, I shall offer no objections. And so Marie Montalti was engaged as maid, and Irene had cause to rue it all the years of her after life; for as the serpent crept into the garden of Eden, so bitter woe entered the household as this woman crossed the threshold.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PRICE OF MY LADY'S SECRET.

FROM Italy, they journeyed back to England, and took up their abode in their elegant town house in London.

There was one thing, however, that puzzled and annoyed Irene, and that was the great change in the demeanor of the maid she had brought with her from Italy.

Marie was no longer deferential to her wishes; there was a look in her black eyes that Irene could not comprehend, and there were occasional hints of secrets she had discovered in the lives of many of the dainty ladies who had employed her, and her words were always accompanied by a cunning smile and a peculiar nod that almost made Irene's blood turn cold as ice.

"Can she suspect? Ah, no, surely not," Irene assured herself over and over again; yet the very thought terrified her.

The girl's manner was becoming intolerable to her, and she concluded to dispense with her services at once.

Marie Montalti received her dismissal with a sneering smile.

"I have something to say which may change your views, signora," she said, and Irene was more than surprised to see the girl glide swiftly across the room and turn the key in the lock.

"Why do you do that?" asked, Irene, indignantly.

"Because I have that to say to you which must be said —and listened to without interruption."

Irene glanced up with haughty displeasure. "You behave very strangely," she said, "I do not like it," and she looked fixedly at the girl whose face was not pleasant to see. There was a lurid light in her eyes, an air of cringing, yet of defiance in her whole manner.

"You must listen to me, Mrs. Esmond, whether it pleases you to do so or not," she said, impertinently, con-

tinuing in a shrill whisper:—"I hold a secret of yours, signora, and it is not well for you to make an enemy of me. I intended to leave your service long ago, but I shall not go away empty handed—you must pay me well if I keep your secret!"

Irene recoiled with a startled, terrified cry; for one moment, the room seemed to whirl around her; she recovered herself by a violet effort, she turned slowly and faced the girl, and no one who witnessed her calm face would have dreamed that her heart was beating in great, strangling throbs.

"You can know no secret of mine," she returned, bravely, but the shrewd maid detected the tremor in her voice. "How *dare* you intimate such a thing!"

"But I do," persisted the girl; "I could easily convince Mr. Esmond that it was a very dark secret, too. If you want it kept from him, you must pay me two hundred pounds for it."

"You have taken leave of your senses, girl!" cried Irene, clutching nervously at the marble mantel, her lovely face paling.

"You will find, on the contrary, that I was never more sane in my life, Mrs. Esmond. Let me tell you what I have to say."

Irene leaned heavily against the cold marble and looked at her. Had this girl found out, in any way, the terrible secret that was wearing her life out; that secret of the past which she could never summon sufficient courage to reveal to Frederick Esmond, but which seemed to have been eating her heart out ever since like blighting canker at the heart of a rose. Ah, no! surely not! she had been too careful, too guarded for that.

"I suppose I must listen," said Irene, "but let what you have to say be said quickly, that this very unpleasant interview may be over as speedily as possible."

The maid rose from her chair and glided up to her. "I made the discovery of your secret when I was nursing you in Italy, signora; when one is delirious they babble many things that they would give their life almost to recall. It is not always nonsense they talk, but of things uppermost, and that which weighs most heavily on their minds."

Irene started, and her face paled to a dead white.

"Go on," she said, as the girl paused abruptly, looking at her with glittering triumphant eyes.

"In the still hours of the day and in the dead watches of the night I listened to you; there was always the same cry on your lips, miladi,—of *two husbands*, and that dark, revengeful face that always came between you and Mr. Esmond."

Irene uttered no cry,—no moan fell from her ashen lips,—but the desperate horror on the white face looking up at the maid was pitiful to see,

She had fancied that story of the past so safely secure, and now, oh, Heaven help her!

"There is no use in repeating all," continued the girl, artfully, "suffice it to say, I know *all*, and a pretty scandal it would make to be sure,—Mr. Esmond would feel it so keenly. I do not wish any harm to come to you, Mrs. Esmond," she added, quickly; "give me the money I ask for and I will go quietly away. Not a word of it shall ever pass my lips. You can trust me."

It was a bold move on the part of the maid; true she had heard her patient murmur of some secret which must be kept forever locked in her own breast and of the face that haunted her and had wrecked the past, and when the other nurse related the incident of the two lines, meaning two husbands, discernable on the pink palms, with clever strategy she had put this and that together, working up quite a little mystery about it.

If she accused Mrs. Esmond of concealing a mysterious secret and there was nothing to it, she could but be discharged, and she was sick and tired of England anyway.

If there *was* anything to it, she would show terror at once, and would accede to any terms.

The terror plainly discernable on Irene's face had betrayed her. Marie knew, though she had shot at random, *she had hit the right mark;* this dainty lady was henceforth and forever in her power.

Irene would have died before she would have acknowledged the truth of what the girl had stated.

"I knew you would rather that I should come to you first," the girl went on. "Mr. Esmond would have—"

"Stop!"

The voice that broke the sunlit silence was like noth-

ing human, more like the moan that one sometimes hears among the trees.

"Stop!" cried Irene, again, though this time there was the recklessness of despair in her tone. She felt that she must temporize with this girl at whatever cost. "I—I—will give you the money you ask for," she said, speaking with an effort, "not because there is anything that I have ever done that the world could accuse me for; I—I—do not admit that there *is* a secret; but I do not wish such an absurd story circulated. You may remain until to-morrow," she said; "I will give you what you ask for, then."

"You are wise, miladi; I knew you would take a sensible view of the matter," returned the girl, and the covert meaning in her words made Irene's eyes flash and her cheeks glow with hot anger.

She pointed to the door, and without another word the maid glided from the room, satisfied with her work.

The golden sunshine in all its rounds since first the flight of time began, surely never fell upon a sadder sight than the beautiful woman, standing alone in that luxurious room.

"Let me try to realize what has happened to me," she gasped. "While I rested secure—believed myself safe—my fate was silently tracking me down; my doom was settling darkly around me, like a funeral pall. Let me try to think clearly what has happened to me.

"The world will soon know. My husband will soon know that I am not what I seemed,—that I have been acting a living lie—that—before I wedded Frederick, I was—a convict's bride!—and—and—his—widow!"

What a savory morsel the scandal mongers would make of it! But for this she cared little, her sole thought was of Frederick—his horror and amazement and the very natural question that would spring to his lips:

"'Why in Heaven's name have you kept this from me?'

How could she answer him; what could she say, that would palliate what she had done?

If Frederick ever found out that past, in that moment she would lose him forever; his love for her would die, then and there. And standing there, in the drifting sunlight, the memory of the night when Frederick Esmond

had asked her hand in marriage, came vividly back to her, and how, standing there by the fountain she had debated with herself whether she should tell him or not; when, he, himself, had settled the matter by saying if she had ever had any other lover—even though he had died, he (Frederick) would never have asked her to marry him; believing, though that other lover lay in his grave his memory would always come between them. Ah, how indeed could she have told him the fatal truth, after hearing *that;* and when she was so sure, too. That dark past which had always seemed to her like some hideous dream, was buried in Leon Forrester's grave.

And now, it would all come to light, if she made an enemy of this girl; her fate was in the maid's hands; hereafter she would never know one happy hour; she would feel as though a sword hung over her head, suspended by a thread, expecting it to fall any day—any hour—and slay her.

Better, far, better, had she told Frederick all *then;* and if he had not loved her sufficiently to have wedded her in the face of it all—to have parted from him then and there even though her heart broke.

And now, the sin of keeping this dread secret from him had found her out after all.

She thought of the lines she had read only that day and pondered over.

"I know that each sinful action,
As surely as night brings shade
Is sometime, somewhere punished
Tho' the hour be long delayed."

Poor, beautiful, hapless Irene, surely those words had been written as a warning to her.

CHAPTER XXII.

FATE POINTS THE WAY.

ACCORDING to her promise, on the morrow Irene gave the maid the money which was to purchase the girl's silence forevermore, as she believed, and on the same day, much to Irene's relief the girl took passage on an out-going steamer bound for Italy.

"Farewell for a time, miladi," the girl muttered, as the blue line of shore faded from her view in the distance. "You think you have looked your last upon Marie Montalti; ah, so you have while the gold lasts; after that you shall see me soon enough."

For many a long day after her departure, Irene had been haunted by the apprehension that the girl might return; but when weeks lengthened into months and months stretched out into years and she did not hear from her, fear, at last died out of her heart.

Those years which had drifted by had brought great changes to the Esmond household. The spacious rooms echoed with the sound of childish laughter, and the spacious corridors with dancing childish feet.

A lovely romping child of four, with a merry laughing roguish face, eyes like blue pansies, and a head tumbled over with short, fluffy flaxen curls, calls Irene mamma, now, and Frederick Esmond, papa. Little Ruby is the darling and the pride of the entire household, and the delight of both her father and mother's heart.

The years that have passed have touched Irene but lightly, adding to her beauty; to the depth and lustre of her eyes—to the perfection and grace of her figure. They have crowned her with magnificent womanhood, for Irene is three-and-twenty now.

Every one who went to Rose Lawn, as their beautiful place was called, and who saw or knew Frederick Esmond and his young wife, laughingly declared that

theirs was one of the happiest marriages in the world. They had been married five years and were lovers still; and Frederick Esmond declared they should always be lovers.

On the morning when this, the second part of our story opens, Irene was sitting alone in the apartment known as the oak room—a large, square, oak panelled room with an immense window which occupied one entire side of it, that looked out on the lawn, there was hardly such another window in England; round it grew white jasmine and white roses, with the lovely purple wisteria.

To sit in the deep recess of that grand window was always a pleasure to Irene. She liked to watch Ruby at play on the lawn with the tame doves and the peacocks; she liked to watch the sun shining over the trees and the flowers.

Irene was sitting, so lost in thought, in the deep recess of the old mullioned window, watching the wind-stirred jasmine, that she did not hear her husband as he entered. Her eyes had travelled out on the lawn; no wonder the picture she saw there caught and held them.

Little Ruby—the spoiled darling of the household—was sitting on one of the garden chairs beneath a blossoming lime tree, her chubby, dimpled fists dug deep into her eyes "doing her best," as nurse Nannette often phrased it, "to get up a good cry." Nannette stood some little distance from the child doing her utmost to coax her into good humor. "Now, Miss Ruby," she said, coaxingly, "if you are a very good child, this afternoon perhaps, your mamma will let me take you to see Humpty Dumpty."

"I don't want to see Humpty Dumpty, I want to go riding with mamma," sobbed the spoiled baby, stamping her foot.

"But you don't know how nice it is going to be," persisted Nannette; "lots of little monkeys, riding on the backs of trained dogs; parrots saying the oddest things; and oh, so many wonderful funny men. Now, Ruby, do be reasonable, you can't go riding with your mamma; there's no room in the victoria. I heard her say only a little while since that it would be quite impossible to take you with her to-day."

As these words fell upon Esmond's ears he looked smilingly down into Irene's amused face.

"Well, Irene," he said, "if you are going riding this afternoon, what is the reason you cannot take Ruby?"

"I am going with three ladies," responded Irene, "and as you have heard the maid just say, there would be no room for her in the victoria; still, the strongest reason in not making room for her is, we are going to visit the hospital to carry fruit and flowers to the sick. I have not been there for months, I am sorry to say. You know I could not take Ruby there, dear."

"No, certainly not," he responded, promptly.

"Always an angel of charity; doing some good deed to make others happy, my Irene," he added, tenderly, catching up one of the little white hands that lay so idly in her lap and pressing it to his lips, in the most gallant lover-like fashion.

"Why should I not, when I am so happy, myself," murmured Irene. "Do you know, Frederick," she said, raising those great dark eyes to his face, "it often seems to me our happiness is too bright to last."

"Why, Irene?" he asked, in good-natured astonishment.

"It is *perfect* happiness, and that seldom lasts long—on earth."

Esmond threw back his fair, handsome head with a hearty, ringing laugh and looked at her.

"Shall I do anything to make you a little less happy, my dear?" he asked, quizzically. "Shall I, for instance, form a phantom friendship with some of the beauties of the neighborhood? Shall I try to be impatient or quarrelsome?"

"No, certainly not," replied Irene, flushing.

Esmond raised the beautiful face with one hand, and looked down tenderly into the dark, dreamy eyes.

"Are you really so well content, Irene?" he asked.

"Yes," she returned. "I have not one shadow of care, not one wish unfulfilled. Our home seems to me a veritable Eden."

"Without the trail of the serpent over it," he says.

He saw her shudder and turn pale; he wondered vaguely why.

"I see my friends coming up the walk," said Irene, ris-

ing hastily. "I must go to them. Good bye, Frederick," she said, wistfully.

"Not good bye; *Au revoir*, my dear Irene," he said, smiling.

How fair Irene looked as she passed out of the morning room. Never again was she destined to wear a happy smile on her face, for from that hour she was advancing steadily to the cruelest fate that ever threw its shadow over a woman's life.

How little Esmond thought as he watched that beautiful and most accomplished woman, of the dark, terrible secret cankering at her heart, which was to burst upon the scandal-loving world all too soon.

With slow tread, greatly at variance with her usual elastic step, Irene had passed down the long corridor.

"I almost wish I had not promised to go with them, today," she murmured to herself, "I feel so unlike myself —so depressed. I am filled with vague presentiment, and fears that have no tangible shape."

Then she laughed at herself. Why should she, who had everything the world held dear, wealth, luxury, love, feel depression, nervous fears? It was absurd; she must throw off such gloomy forebodings. She told herself she would laugh them away. Her friends should not see her down-hearted, and she thought of lines she had heard on Esmond's lips many a time, and slowly she repeated them as she walked down the grand old corridor:

"Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone;
For this brave old earth must borrow its mirth,
It has troubles enough of its own.
Sing, and the hills will answer;
Sigh, it is lost on the air!
The echoes bound to a joyful sound,
But shrink from voicing care.

"Rejoice, and men will seek you;
Grieve, and they turn and go;
They want full measure of all your pleasure,
But they do not want your woe.
Be glad, and your friends are many;
Be sad, and you lose them all;
There are none to decline your nectar'd wine,
But alone you must drink life's gall.

"Feast, and your halls are crowded;
Fast, and the world goes by;
Succeed and give and it helps you live,
But no man can help you die.
There is room in the halls of pleasure,
For a long and a lordly train,
But one by one we must all file on
Through the narrow aisles of pain."

E. W. W.

Yes, they taught a grand lesson of life, to throw off sombre thoughts; this she would do at any cost.

By the time Irene reached the drawing-room, where her friends awaited her, she was quite her usual self. More like the Irene of old, Miss Reynold's who had been one of her bridemaids, declared, than she had seen her for many a day.

"How good my lady is to the poor and the sick," remarked one of the maids, as she watched the carriage containing the party drive out of the great arched gateway. "Such hampers of delicacies as she had the butler pack and stow away under the seats. Hot-house fruits, rich cake, and old, rare wines that were worth a fortune in themselves."

Meanwhile, the party were bowling along at a rapid pace down the boulevard.

"When shall we make the first stop?" asked Miss Staples, glancing over her list of places she had marked down to call at.

"To the St. Thomas' hospital, of course," laughed one of the young ladies. "Jessie Reynold's could'nt pass that."

"Why?" asked Irene, looking wonderingly at Jessie's flushing face.

"Oh, I really forgot you did not know about it, my dear Irene," laughed one of the young ladies. "You have been away from London several months. Well, the fact is, Jessie's lover is connected with the St. Thomas' Hospital in the capacity of doctor; that's why she takes so much interest in visiting the sick lately."

"For shame, Miss Staples!" cried Jessie, "how *can* you malign me so. I should go to the hospital just the same if Dr. Lennox was, or was not, there."

"Oh, of course," chorused her companions, laughing merrily at her evident embarrassment.

So at St. Thomas' Hospital they halted.

Again that indescribable sensation of depression and heavy gloom swept over Irene's heart like the foreboding of some terrible calamity about to transpire. Ah! if she had but obeyed that impulse and turned back even as she stood within the portal, her life would have been different, and this work would never have been written.

But who can foresee the end of fate, to guard against dire calamities, even though they lead to a tragedy?

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PREMONITION OF COMING EVIL—THE SHADOW CAST ON BEFORE.

THE visitors were shown into the main reception-room, where they were met by one of the matrons, who consented to conduct the party through the main wards.

In one of the corridors, they saw a fair-haired young man—the typical type of an Englishman, whom Jessie introduced to her friends as Dr. Lennox.

"Where have I seen that gentleman before," thought, Irene, in puzzled wonder, as the party moved on, all save Jessie, who hung back to have a word in private with her lover.

Suddenly Irene caught her breath with a sudden gasp: as in a glass darkly, the past rose up before her; she remembered this was the identical young man who had tossed the paper down on the bench of the waiting-room, and which she had by chance picked up, and learned the fate, and the true character, of the man she had wedded within that very hour.

Was this sudden shock she had received, the meaning of the depression that had weighed upon her heart all the morning. With a great shudder, Irene turned away. The past was past—she would not rake up its dead ashes—she would forget it.

Jessie Reynolds was, at that instant having quite a spirited discussion with her lover, who had just made a very elaborate bow to another party of young ladies, who had just passed down the corridor.

More than once Jessie had noticed this very party at the hospital, and they usually lingered longest in the wards upon which Dr. Lennox was in attendance—and the one rock ahead in Jessie's life was—jealousy. She could not endure to see her lover smiling down into a lovely face, or even courteously polite to a beautiful woman.

Her brows darkened, as the party to which the young doctor had just raised his hat, with an elaborate bow, passed down the corridor.

"Walter!" she said, passionately, "if you don't stop flirting with other girls, I'm going to break off our engagement again—I really mean it."

"My dear Jess," he replied, in a decided English accent—"you've been doing nothing but break off our engagement ever since it was first entered into; there won't be much left of it after awhile. But really, Jess, if the pretty creatures admire me, it is'nt *my* fault, pon my honor."

"You encourage them; you look after them; you put yourself in their way on every possible occasion, I don't doubt," declared Jessie, ready to cry with vexation.

"He'd be rather a tame sort of fellow to close his eyes when a pretty girl passes, don't you know," returned the young doctor, languidly.

"You ought not to think any other girl but one—pretty," flashed out Jess, bitterly.

"Now, Jessie, if you're going to turn out to be a jealous woman, I'll—"

"Being a hospital doctor has just spoiled you," cut in Jessie, hotly; "I won't listen to you—I am going to join my friends," and she turned abruptly away.

"Walter," she said, hesitating a little, "you can talk to Mrs. Esmond as much as you like, for she's a married lady, but if you so much as look at Miss Desmond or Miss Staples, I'll never speak to you again while I live, so there!" and off she started down the corridor.

"I say, Jess," he called out, after her—"there's a heap more danger in smiling at the married beauties than the single ones, any day."

But Jessie did not hear, she was already half-way down the long corridor.

As Dr. Lennox was passing the door of one of the main wards, he encountered an associate physician, who had but that morning joined the force of hospital physicians. As Dr. Ross was a man of much experience, study and travel, with a large practice, he was considered a most valuable acquisition to the staff.

They had exchanged but a few words ere they were joined hastily by one of the matrons of an adjoining ward.

"Oh, doctor," she cried, appealingly, turning to Lennox, "will you please come and see No. 23? He's raving and cursing like a maniac. He utterly refuses to take his medicine; and, by the way he's going on, he will be in a brain fever by midnight. It's as much as a nurse's life is worth to go near him. He's a new patient, brought in only this morning."

"I ought to look in at a few other patients just now," said Dr. Lennox, meditatively.

"If you like, I will relieve you in—say ten minutes—fifteen, at the outside," said Dr. Ross, pleasantly, "I shall get around to that ward at about that time."

"I should be glad if you would," responded Lennox.

The two physicians separated, and Dr. Lennox followed the matron to the ward indicated. She passed on; and he entered the long, wide room alone casting his eyes hurriedly about for cot No. 23.

It was in the center of the room, and he approached it at once, smiling to observe the patient was apparently in a deep sleep—having exhausted his vocabulary of wrath which he had hurled at the nurse he had succumbed to heavy slumber.

Lennox drew down the counterpane which the man had pulled up over his face; and then a low, astounded whistle broke from the doctor's lips.

"My God! its Heathcliff—or Forrester, rather"—he exclaimed, below his breath, in the utmost amazement. I am not mistaken; it is he as sure as I live. I thought he perished in that horrible holocaust of a prison five years ago. He must have escaped and have been in hiding ever since.

"The question is," pondered the young doctor, "shall I give him up to the authorities as an escaped convict, or shall I not. By George, now, I don't feel as though I could, although he did cheat me out of fifty pounds, and put me in a beastly fix for the want of it."

While the doctor was pondering over the strange discovery he had made, the matron reëntered the room.

"If you please, doctor," she said, here are lady visitors, who would like to come through this ward."

"Show them right in, my good woman," responded Lennox. Glancing through the partly open door he be-

held his *fiancé*, and her companions approaching. In an instant he had forgotten his great discovery.

"It's Jessie and her party," he exclaimed, in dismay; "if I should remain here, and be even civil to those pretty girls with her, why the engagement would be broken off again;" and the English accent was more strongly marked than ever, as he muttered the words under his breath.

He made a hurried exit through an opposite door, barely escaping being observed by the party who entered, headed by the matron.

"If you are tired, you might rest by this window, Irene, and we will make a tour of the ward; the scenery from this window is perfectly delightful," declared Jess; and to this Irene assented, and they moved on; the matron lingering by Irene's side, explaining the clock-like regularity with which everything around and about their famous institution moved.

"This is an isolated ward, and here are to be found our very worst cases, madame," she continued. "There for instance," pointing to cot No. 23, "is a very hard patient to manage. He came off a steamer; slipped on the gang plank, breaking his ankle and dislocating his shoulder, and was brought here cursing and swearing like a madman. You cannot see his face from here; we will cross the room, whenever you are ready, that you may have a better view of him. His face shows the trace of beauty, but the marks of dissipation have nearly stamped it out.

"He is really the most vicious patient we have had for many a day—even in his sleep, dreadful imprecations burst from his lips; and he goes off into almost a frenzy, raving wildly, about some woman whom he is in search of. I fancy it is his wife for whom he searches, for even in his delirium he is always vowing though his life be black and stained, he will *force* her to go with him though he should choose to take her to the furthermost ends of the earth; she will be *obliged* to go with him even though she has learned to *hate* him.

"If it is his wife for whom he searches, I pity the poor creature, when he does find her—he is such a desperate man."

"Why his face is awful to see when he works himself up into these paroxysms of rage; his face grows livid in

spots, his eyes glare, like two balls of fire, and his purple lips are flecked with foam. No wonder the nurses are afraid to go near him. Poor things, who can blame them; he is a subject more fit for the insane asylum than a quiet hospital like this.

"The only doctor who can do anything with him is Dr. Ross, a physician who has just come to London to take charge of this place; he seems to have a deal of patience with the man. I do hope his recovery will be rapid, and that he will leave here soon. He has only been here since this morning—a few hours—but it seems like so many months."

They proceed, as the matron speaks, nearer the cot.

The man starts up with a fierce imprecation as the footsteps draw near, turning his face toward them.

One glance at that face,—and a shriek that sounds like nothing human breaks from Irene's lips. She has recognized *Leon Forrester!*

CHAPTER XXIV.

"HAS THE GRAVE OPENED AND GIVEN BACK ITS DEAD!"

THAT was the one awful epoch of beautiful, hapless Irene's life. The length of eternity seemed crowded into that one moment; the light of the sun seemed suddenly to grow dark and the inky blackness of Hades to enfold her; the room to whirl around her and her heart to break with one great throb. How wild the wind moaned outside of the open window, and how harsh the notes of a bird sounded, as it flew away in full song.

She did not fall down dead, she did not utter one cry after that first desperate pitiful moan, but stood there like one paralyzed, incapable of speech or action, gazing down in awful terror into the dark, revengeful face before her, her own face white as death.

Had the yawning grave opened and given back its dead?

This was Leon Forrester and no other.

She raised her white hands as though beseeching Heaven to save her. A chill so deep, so bitter, she thought it must be death crept over her, for the dark face had turned toward her, and two burning eyes met her own.

The shock was so awful, so terrible, there was such a ringing in her ears, she could not catch the words the matron was uttering.

She trembled like a leaf in the wind, she quite expected him to grasp her, crying out, "I know you, even though you shrink from me—you are Irene!—*my* wife!"

His first question would be, where was she living? and then, the whole story would come out; she must tell him all, even though he struck her dead, then and there, at his feet in furious rage after she had told him.

She would tell him the truth, of what avail to hide one detail. She must tell him how she had read that he had

perished in the prison fire; and that a year later she had married again believing him dead. She dared not think what would happen next. How his harsh laugh would ring out on the summer air, and he would cry out with fierce exultation:

"You are not *his* wife; you are *mine!* You shall leave him, and come with me!"

"My dear lady," said the matron, touching her arm, "there is no cause for such terror, the man cannot harm you, *he is blind*, totally blind."

The words fell upon Irene's ears like an electric shock. Blind! could it be possible that in the dark, vacant eyes that seemed to meet and hold her own, there was no sight? If this be true *he had not recognized her as Irene, he could not see her.*

In that moment the thought came to her to turn and fly from him, fly to the other end of the world, he could never find her, never, for he was blind.

Irene staggered back, clutched the nearest chair for support and sunk into it.

"See," said the matron, "we startled him from his slumbers, he has sunk back on his pillow again, and his labored breathing shows us he is dropping off into a deep sleep again."

Irene was watching the dark, sneering, revengeful face, with bated breath.

And as she watched, one of the nurses entered quickly, and there was a hurried consultation between the nurse and the matron, and the woman as quickly withdrew again.

"You and your friends have been so kind in aiding us in the past, madame—helping us out of difficulties—might I be so bold as to ask a favor of you now?" asked the matron appealingly.

"What can I do for you?" said Irene, and she was startled at the sound of her own voice, it sounded so harsh and unnatural.

"If you would but kindly watch by No. 23 for ten minutes," she said, hesitatingly. "There has just been a great railway disaster near here, and hundreds of the dying and wounded are being brought into the hospital, the vast staff of nurses and doctors, the matrons as well,

are all summoned quickly to aid the sufferers, they must have immediate attention.

"No. 23 is not troublesome now, he is under a strong opiate, yet there needs to be some one of great reliability left here to watch over him, his life hangs by a single thread."

"Is—is—there so much—danger?" Irene managed to articulate.

"So great," returned the matron, "that if this vapor should fail to be inhaled by him exactly on the hour stroke—which is exactly ten minutes from now—his life would pay the forfeit; so the doctors said when they held their consultation a little while ago."

"It is easy, the inhaling: you see the vial to which this rubber tube is attached; press the tube and as the vapor is sprayed out, hold it beneath the patient's nostrils. With care he will pull through. Will you watch by him, madame?"

Irene could not refuse; she bowed her head in token of assent.

"Many thanks, madame," returned the matron, gratefully. "I see your friends have passed on into the other apartment," she added, "I will inform them of your kind concession," and she hurried away, leaving Irene alone with her mortal foe, alone save for the presence of the other patients in the cots that lined either side of the aprtment, and they had evidently succumbed to the chloral impregnated atmosphere, for they slept.

When the door closed after the matron's retreating form, Irene rose from her chair, and with tottering feet drew nearer to the couch.

"There is not the faintest shadow of a mistake," she said. "I am not mad nor am I dreaming; the grave has given back its dead; it is *he*, the wretch who wrecked my life with a cruel lie.

"My God! what am I to do. The full horror of my position bursts upon me," she moaned, dropping her white face in her hands, and she wept as few women weep in a lifetime, crying out to Heaven that she had married another believing this man dead.

"He has come back from the grave to part me from my love," she wailed out, "Heaven save me from going mad at the thought of it."

Suddenly she starts to her feet, clutching her hands tightly over her beating heart.

"Let me remember the matron's words," she murmured, in a shrill, piteous whisper: "The patient's danger is so great that if he should fail to inhale this vapor exactly on the hour stroke—which we leave with you—his life would pay the forfeit. His life! And it lacked but three minutes to that time now.

Irene reached out her white hand for the vial, but something seemed to clutch at her nervous fingers and hold them spellbound. Her heart beat. What strange thought came to her in that moment?—for suddenly, she clasped her hands together and raised them to heaven.

"He stands between you and your husband and child," whispered a still, small voice to her throbbing heart. "*If he were dead, you would be free!*"

A great gasp broke from her lips. If he were dead! The thought seemed to burn its way into her brain and take possession of her. The pity of it was, that she dared to listen to that strange, sibilant voice, that was whispering to her heart.

The great folly of her life first commenced in not putting the thought from her. There was danger in ruminating over it, a peril so horrible she should have shrunk from it. And the same still, small voice whispered more boldly because she had listened to it:

"Why should you save this wretch who wrecked your young life? He did not spare *you*. He stands between you and your husband and little child. If he lives he will part you from them. You hold his fate in your hands. See the dark terrors the future holds if you save him, this man, who stands between you and love and happiness. *Can you* doom yourself to eternal misery by saving him? You would but have to sit still and motionless in yon chair, with your hands clasped together in your lap while the moments dragged themselves by. The result would be, he would pass into that deep sleep that knows no waking, and you would be free.

"Oh, I cannot, I cannot," moaned Irene. "I am not wicked enough for that. I must save this wretch's life, no matter what happens after. It would be murder if I did not; yes, murder!"

Never did good and evil fight so valiantly for a human

heart as they struggled in that supreme moment for Irene's.

She grasped the vial with her death cold hands, and drew nearer the couch with faltering steps, her face white as marble.

"Can you give up love, life, hope, and happiness, doom yourself to a life of misery with this man?" cried the same still, mocking voice again.

"Heaven help me! I am tried beyond my strength," cried out Irene, with a bitter sob.

Some one opened the door, but she did not hear. She did not see the tall form of Dr. Ross approaching, in her intense excitement; she did not heed that he had spoken to her, was standing near her, transfixed with horror as he listened to the wild words that fell from her lips.

"His life is in *my* hands," she muttered, bending over the dark, revengeful face on the pillow. "If he dies the world will never know that I was once this man's wife; and, believing him dead—Heaven help me—I married a—again. If he were to die no one would ever know of that horrible past. The world would never know, Frederick would never know. I could keep it buried deep in my heart forevermore, carrying it down to the grave with me."

Irene had listened too long. The terrible force of the mightiest temptation that ever sued for the mastery of a human heart overcame her. She had listened too long to the tempting voice of conscience. With a bitter cry she dashed the vial from her.

The supreme moment had come and gone. Irene threw up her hands with a wild, hushed cry, and fell by the couch of him whose fate she had decided in a deep, death-like swoon!

CHAPTER XXV.

A GREAT TEMPTATION.

FOR one moment Dr. Ross had stood transfixed with surprise as he had entered the door, murmuring under his breath, "Irene, by all that is wonderful! Thus do we meet again after six long years, and in all that time I could not forget her. Irene," he exclaimed, advancing. She did not hear him. He stood quite still, transfixed by the deathly whiteness of her face, and struck dumb by the words that fell from her lips, revealing to him her pitiful secret, and leaving her at her old lover's mercy.

As Irene falls at his feet, he catches the slender form in his strong arms, and then, the clock on the wall slowly tolls the passing hour in slow, measured strokes.

Dr. Ross has no time to think of aught else save his patient in this vital moment. He seizes the vial from Irene's clenched hand, and holds the tube to the patient's nostrils. The quivering breath and the faint moisture assures him the man is inhaling the life-giving draught which will save his life.

Before he can turn to Irene's assistance he sees signs of returning consciousness. A sudden, unconquerable desire seizes the doctor to know what her waking thoughts will be, believing that her foe is no more, and as he sees her dark eyes open, he steals all unobserved into the shadow of the adjacent curtains, and watches Irene with bated breath.

Very slowly the dark eyes open; Irene springs to her feet with a low, terrified cry. Was it some dark, terrible dream that had clutched so heavily at her heart? Her eyes encountered the vial that had fallen from the doctor's hand to the floor, then wandered to the white face lying against the pillow, and then, Heaven help her, Irene remembered all, and the cry that fell from her lips was pitiful to hear.

She sprung to her feet, gazing in terror at that stark, white face, crying out that she had killed him.

"God be merciful to me," she moaned, in her terror. "Oh, if it were to be done over again, Leon Forrester, and I could give my life to save yours, I would do it," she cried.

When the doctors entered, and gathered around his bedside for consultation, what would that ghastly, grayish face tell them, she wondered, vaguely? Would they discover the cause of death—that the medicine had not been administered? What could she say in self-defence—that sleep had overcome her? Sleep! how could she say that she had dared to sleep when a human life was entrusted to her care? Kneeling there, beside that couch, Irene suffered a lifetime of misery.

How the terrible moments passed she never knew. She heard the tread of feet in the corridor without, and she knew that it must be the consulting physicians, who made their tours at regular intervals—they were coming at last.

Irene could hear their low, hushed voices as they entered the door, their expression of hope that they would find the condition of No. 23 much improved; the powerful inhaling vapor would draw him back from the gates of death, if anything could.

How the beautiful, hopless woman cowered as she heard the words; how she wished in that moment that God would strike her dead for yielding to the bitterly-cruel temptation to withhold the life-giving inhalation.

There had been a time when in this very hospital they had given her the name, "the Angel of the Helpless." Oh, if they but knew—oh, if they but knew what she had done!

Very softly they advanced, and stood around the sufferer's couch. "How is our patient?" asked one of the doctor's, bending his ear down to listen to the faint throbbing of the sufferer's heart.

The words were addressed to Irene, but she dared not look up or raise her head from the coverlet lest they should read the horrible guilty fear and despair in the death-white face and terror-stricken eyes. She neither moved nor spoke; she could not have replied if her life had depended upon the utterance of a single word.

For a moment, that seemed the length of eternity to the guilty creature crouching there, a death-like silence reigned in the room. Were the doctors looking at each other with horror in their faces, Irene wondered, vaguely. Would the horrible stillness be broken by the stern, awful words, "What does this mean? The medicine has not been given the patient!" For, of course, the wise doctors would know—oh, yes, they would know! How oppressive the silence grew. Were they pointing to her with significant faces? How she wished she dare raise her face and see what this silence meant; see what was passing around her! It was one of the matrons who spoke—she had bent over the dark face lying against the pillow with bated breath; then a sharp cry broke from her lips.

"Doctor," she cried, her low voice quivering with alarm, "this is not life! See the gray pallor round the mouth—the glaze of death is creeping over these eyes; death-damp stands out on the high forehead. The sight of death is not new to me—the man is *dying!*

Ah, me! how the wind among the trees, whose leafy branches fluttered against the casement, seemed to take up the word with a low, moaning shriek and whisper it to the whole world outside! And it whispered something else, too; something that only Irene, kneeling in such abject terror at Leon Forrester's bedside, knew and understood. Irene wondered vaguely why the doctors did not answer the startling, vehement words that fell from the matron's lips.

"The stranger is dying," repeated the matron.

"It looks strangely, startlingly like it," responded one of the physicians, gravely. "If you ladies will kindly leave the room we will hold a consultation. This case seems to have taken an unusual turn. I am mystified; as you say, my dear matron, the man before us has every appearance of death."

Only Heaven alone knew of the superhuman effort Irene put forth to prevent giving utterance to the shrieks of terror that seemed to rise up in her throat and stifle her.

Like one stricken blind, she struggled up from her knees, and groped her way with unsteady steps from the room.

No one seemed to notice her, every thought seemed bent upon the sick man.

She made her way down the cool, wide corridor, past the patients who, in bygone days had blessed her and kissed the folds of her robes with reverend lips, calling her the Angel of the Helpless. How stealthily Irene crept past them, her head bent dejectedly on her breast, crept down into the silence of the garden, throwing herself upon her knees among the long grasses and lifting her white face to the waning sunlight. She dared not pray, though the white lips moved dumbly. There was no pardon for what she had done.

Glancing up toward the windows, she saw the doctors move hurriedly to and fro with white faces; she knew what that meant, oh, yes, she knew. It told her throbbing heart that Leon Forrester was dead.

How long Irene knelt in the garish sunlight, among the tall grasses, she never knew; a step aroused her; she looked up in affright and saw one of the doctors approaching.

"He is coming to tell me Leon Forrester is dead," she thought. "He knows all. He has come to accuse me. Heaven pity and direct me! What shall I do?"

The doctor rapidly came nearer. A vague presentiment crossed Irene's mind that he was searching for her, and a wild, mad impulse to fly, to hide herself, anywhere —anywhere, occurred to her. She saw now how imminent was her peril. She had stood quietly by while a life had slowly drifted out, without lifting her hand to save it, yet she might have saved Leon Forrester if she would. Ah yes, she could have saved him, but she did not. Now they were coming to accuse her of it.

With a white, ghastly face, and eyes dilating with fear, Irene struggled to her feet, and fled swiftly through the green, sunlit grounds that surrounded the hospital, ran fleetly—swiftly, to hide in the thick green coverts of the park; but the swift footsteps seemed to gain upon her.

It was no delusion then; they had discovered what she had done, and they were pursuing her. At that moment she was mad with fear. And of all the pain she had suffered none was so great as this she suffered hiding

among the green trees on which the golden sunlight fell, hiding in fear, and abject terror.

No one could deny the swift and sure punishment of sin who could have seen that white terror-distorted face; and the wild, frightened eyes peering out from the midst of the thick, green leaves.

She had hoped that the doctor had not seen her, that he would pass her by; but when he had reached the lilac bushes behind which she crouched in the long, green grass he paused.

With folded arms young Dr. Ross gazed pityingly down on the white face cowering at the foot of the gnarled beech trees.

With gentle hands he raised her, placing her upon one of the garden chairs.

He was touched by the sight of her utter terror and abject fear. Alas! how fatally lovely she was in her helplessness. Even had he come there to condemn her, he would have found that the words would have died on his lips unuttered.

The eyes looking down into her own with such a strange light in them, terrified her more than words could have done.

"It is right that you should feel remorse for what you have done; or rather for what you failed to do," broke in Dr. Ross, sternly, "still, you need not stand in such terror of me, although, *I know all.* I and I alone am possessed of your secret," he said, slowly.

With a superhuman effort Irene raised her dark dazed eyes to his face.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"YOU MUST DECIDE YOUR FUTURE, HERE AND NOW."

"I KNOW all," he repeated; "by chance I offered my services to take the place of another doctor by the bedside of No. 23. As I entered the ward, approaching the cot, I could not help but hear the words that fell from your lips, which fairly paralyzed me with horror. Suffice it to say I administered the inhaling vapor you dashed from you, and which has saved the patient's life—he will live."

"Oh, sir, as you are strong, be merciful!" she wailed; "I was so sorely tempted, I did not mean to do wrong, I could have died sooner than harm one hair of his head,—I—oh, be merciful, and spare me."

"I do not want to be anything but merciful," he said, "at the same time I should be just."

The cry of mortal terror that fell from her lips was pitiful to hear; then she looked up into his face with the calmness of utter despair.

"I shall not be harsh and cruel to you," he went on, steadily;—I would rather shield you, than betray you. I will tell you why I will keep the knowledge of what you have done from the world," he went on,—It is because I once loved you, Irene—and I love—you *still.*"

A thunderbolt falling from a clear, sunlit sky at her feet could not have startled Irene more. This dark, bronzed-faced, bearded doctor whom she never remembered having seen before, loved her; why—surely, the man was mad!"

"You have looked into my face and have not recognized me; suns of foreign countries have tanned me; and, together with this dark heavy beard, I am no doubt greatly changed—yet in me, you behold one who will befriend and protect you, if you so will it—Victor Ross—your old lover."

A cry of dismay broke from Irene's lips,—

"You are not—Victor—Ross,—surely," she gasped.

"Yes, I am he," he responded.

As she looked up into his face, she saw it was as he said—greatly altered. A sudden inspiration came to her: could she prevail upon him to keep her secret? He loved her once well enough to shield her from the world's scorn; surely she might influence him now—she would try.

She rose from her seat on the garden bench and flung herself on the green grass at his feet, clinging to him with hot, burning hands, so imploringly, so beseechingly, that he was compelled to listen.

"You will not betray me," she sobbed; "by the old love which once filled your heart for me, I pray you to shield me now. Keep my secret,—never let the world know and I will atone for it all the years of my after life. I was mad to listen to the tempter's voice—madder still to yield to it!"

Victor Ross took her burning hands in his and raised her to her feet, his passionate eyes devouring her fair loveliness. She was more beautiful to him, with all her faults, than a saint would have been.

"You say you heard all," she went on, piteously, "I can only add I am married to another—one whom I love—never dreaming *he* still lived—and—and—I have a little child, Victor,—a lovely little girl. For the sake of my husband and little child, Victor, I pray you—I *plead* with you not to let the world know what you have seen and heard."

"Who is it that you have married, Irene," he asked, in a cold, hard voice, and she answered slowly—"Frederick Esmond."

"Esmond—my—rival!" he exclaimed—"you married *him* then, after all?"

"Yes," she moaned, feebly, "and,—and—we have been so happy ever since, Victor."

His face darkened angrily when he heard her say that, and the hard lines settled about his mouth.

"Tell me what it is that you want me to do," he said. "I am not quite sure that I understand."

"I want you to keep my secret, forever," she sobbed,

—"my husband does not know that I was ever his—his —wife."

"Forrester's you mean," he interrogated, grimly.

She nodded her head dumbly—

"Frederick does not know one word of the past," she sobbed—"nor, need he *ever* know. This man is blind, he could never find me. See how humbly I plead with you on my knees, Victor, to keep my secret. You loved me once,—by that love spare me now."

"I loved you well, Irene," he said, "but I love honor more. You are nothing to Frederick Esmond; by your own confession you are this other man's wife; Esmond has no claim upon you"—and a strange light flashed into his eyes as he uttered the words—a fierce light that made her cower and tremble.

"Do you remember what I told you once, Irene?" he said, "on the day when I parted from you?"

She shook her dark head, and he went on slowly, "I told you then that I should be the bitterest foe—even to the death—as long as my life lasted, of the man who won you from me; and now, with the weapon, so to speak, in my hand, which will part you from him, think you I will fail to use it? There is but one way to seal my lips, Irene; but one means of keeping this scandalous story from the world. You must part from Esmond at once and forever—part from him and his child. Go where you will. Under that condition, and that condition only, I will take a solemn vow that your secret shall never pass my lips."

"I cannot give up Frederick and my little child," she moaned, "the pangs of death would be easier to bear. Oh, Victor! what would the alternative be?"

He stooped down and whispered a few words in her ear; she fell back against the garden bench, white as death.

"Oh God, be merciful, I cannot give up Frederick and my little child," she repeated, vehemently, "they are part of my heart, part of my soul."

"Then I will go to Esmond, the man you are now duping, and tell him *all*," cried Dr. Ross, hoarsely. "Think how Esmond will scorn, and abhor you, when he has heard your story. He will turn you from his door," he went on, vehemently. "Leave him quietly, Irene, and

save your reputation before the world; *stay*, and you face the penalty. You must decide here and now."

"Give me a little time to think," she wailed, "one short hour."

He bowed. "I will leave you, Irene," he said; "in an hour from now, I will return—you will be here?"

She bowed her dark head.

He turned and walked away. The sound of his footsteps died away on the pebbled walk; then with a cry, so bitter, it startled even the singing birds from their nests in the trees, she fell forward, burying her face in the long, daisy studded grass.

The sun shone over her as she lay there; the summer winds swept over her, odorous with the breath of roses. She lay there, heedless of what was transpiring about her,—wildly praying for death.

"Was it a dream—a hideous nightmare—the events of the last hour," she asked herself.

Was she, who had always shuddered at the bare mention of sin; she, who had grieved with all the pitying tenderness of her heart over a butterfly's broken wing, or a robin's death. Could it be true that the blackest and most pitiful of all charges that could be written against a human being's name was entered against hers? Would the word "guilty" be written against it?

The world is severe in its censure and condemnation; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life, are its sentiments.

She tried to look the great sorrow that had fallen upon her, fully in the face.

She thought of her luxurious home, of the handsome young husband, awaiting her return, who was dearer than life itself to her; of the lovely, laughing child, whom she had left playing on the lawn, round whom her heart was twined so closely.

"I cannot part from them," she wailed; "Oh, God, I cannot!"

Then on the other hand, she could see the black horror and disgrace that would fall upon her if they knew all. Would it be best to leave quietly, leave her husband and little child—letting Frederick think what he would; or, remain, to disgrace them before the world—and then to be turned from Frederick's door after all.

The picture was maddening!

She knew well that he might have forgiven her the bitter deception of keeping that horrible past from him. But would he ever forgive her for yielding to the awful black temptation that had prompted her to see that convict's life drifting from this world, to the unknown, when, by stretching out her hand, she could have saved him.

No matter whom or what he was, a human life was worth saving.

She could picture Frederick's horror and dismay. Ah, she could never endure to see that look on his face; better exile—death—than that. Ah, yes, surely he would abhor her when he knew all: after all it was showing her mercy, as Victor Ross had said, allowing her to go quietly away and keeping her pitiful secret.

The sound of footsteps on the gravel path warned her of Victor Ross' return. A moment later and he stood before her.

"You have come to a decision, Irene?" he said.

She raised her great, dark, woful eyes to his face, and in a voice that sounded like nothing human, answered:—

"I *will* go—away. God help me! I will leave Frederick and my child—my darling! If you will pledge yourself to keep my bitter secret from the world and from them, *forever*. But—I—I—cannot go and leave them—I cannot part from them without looking on their faces just once again!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

PARTING FROM YOU LIKE THIS IS MORE CRUEL THAN DEATH.

IRENE turned, and walked slowly away, Victor Ross gazing after her with a strange light in his eyes.

"You won her from me, Frederick Esmond," he muttured, "and now, I have parted you two forever. I told you once I should take a bitter vengeance on the man who came between us if it were ever in my power, and I have kept my word."

He knew it was an ignoble thing which he had done—holding his knowledge of her secret as a sword over her head to part her from his rival, but he excused himself by declaring over and over again, as he paced up and down under the trees, that the course he had pointed out to Irene was the only one open to her. Part from Esmond she must—there was no question about that; and, keeping that which he had discovered from the world, was an act of kindness toward her.

Would she ever turn to him in the far-off future for advice or comfort? he wondered, vaguely, and wild, exultant day-dreams filled his brain of that future, which was built around Irene.

Meanwhile, Irene had entered the wide corridor, and had groped her way like one suddenly stricken blind to the reception-room; there she found her friends waiting for her.

"Oh, Irene," cried Miss Reynolds, "we have been looking everywhere for you; where have you been? We, —"

She stopped short, as she caught sight of Irene's face.

"Oh, Irene," exclaimed her companions in a breath, "are you ill? Your face is as white as death, and you are trembling violently," and they crowded about her with great solicitude.

By a great effort, Irene rallied; she forced a smile to her lips. They did not see how tightly the white, ringed hands were clutched together over her heart.

"I felt a little faint," she said, "and I went out into the grounds and sat down under the trees. I—I—am better, now. I pray you do not give yourselves any uneasiness on my account; do not let me spoil your pleasure." During the drive homeward, she talked, laughed, and jested; no one would have thought to have seen her, that her heart was breaking. She was crying out to Heaven, that this ride would never end.

They were to dine with her. She must sit through torturesome hours and entertain them.

When they drove through the high arched gateway, Irene looked eagerly around for her child. Little Ruby was not in sight. As soon as they reached the drawing-room, Irene rang for her maid.

"Send Ruby to me, here, at once," she ordered, and to the maid's astonishment she added,—"Ruby will dine with us to-day."

The girl soon returned with the intelligence the child was out with Nannette, her nurse.

Irene never knew how the rest of the afternoon wore away. She did her best to keep the thread of her guest's conversation, to reply to their small talk; and it was the greatest effort of her life. Ah, Heaven, would they never go!

They took their departure at last, just as the great lamps were being lighted in the parks, and the stars were commencing to come out in the evening sky.

The moment Irene found herself alone she flew to the nursery, and with shaking hand, drew back the velvet *portières*, and the sight that met her gaze was engraven upon her heart while her memory lasted.

Nannette, the maid, sat in a low willow rocker before the grate fire. The evenings were slightly chill now, and the pine logs in the burnished fire-place threw a rosy grateful warmth into the room, that was very comforting.

On Nannette's lap, sat Ruby—her darling—the pride of her heart!

How lovely the little one looked, sitting there in the full glow of the firelight. The child was evidently tired, for

the flaxen curly head drooped against Nannette's shoulder. Irene gazed with her heart in her eyes.

"Now, Miss Ruby," the nurse was saying, as she proceeded to disrobe the child, "I am going to put you to bed, and you *must* go to sleep,—that's a darling."

"You may put me to bed, Nannette, but I shall not go to sleep," declared little Ruby, decidedly.

"And, why not?" asked Nannette, despairingly.

"Because I haven't kissed my mamma good night; and you haven't told me that fairy story you promised me, Nanny."

"Your mamma has been very busy, no doubt," replied Nannette, "she will come in to look after you, very soon, now, and she will not like it if you are still awake."

"Yes, she *will* like it," persisted little Ruby. "She and I always have great romps when she finds me awake, and I'm going to wait for that."

"But do wait in your nice little bed, then," coaxed Nannette. "If you will, I'll tell you the fairy story."

To this proposition the child very readily agreed, and allowed Nannette to lay her down in her downy little nest.

"Now begin the story, Nannette," she cried, impatiently, "I'm in bed now."

"Yes, but you must close your eyes and keep them shut very tight," coaxed the maid.

"Well, after you begin," said the child, very warily.

Nannette smiled, as she drew her willow rocker close to the bedside.

"Once on a time," she commenced, "there was a very, very wicked woman who had a very beautiful daughter; she loved this daughter very dearly, but because of some wrong she had done the girl was taken from her, she—"

"I don't like that story," exclaimed the child, "I'd rather hear all over again the one about the wee dainty fairies dancing on the blades of grass in the moonlight in the glen, with the chiming of the blue bells for music, and the twinkle of the fire-flies for lamps. Mamma used to tell me that story. It's—so—nice."

The last words trailed off into a sleepy yawn. The flaxen curly head dropped back among the lace frills of the pillow, the child had drifted into the beautiful land of Nod."

"I knew she was as sleepy as sleepy could be," murmured Nannette.

At that moment Irene entered the nursery with an unsteady step.

"You may go, Nannette," she; said still the girl lingered at the door, looking wistfully back.

"Oh, my lady," she exlaimed, "are you ill? You do look so pale. Do let me sit with you, my lady;" but Irene shook her head.

"I want to be alone with Ruby," she said. "It will be some time before your master returns," she went on, and I do not want to be disturbed until that time, you understand? I want no one to disturb me under any pretext, Nannette."

"I shall see to it that you are not, my lady," replied Nannete.

"Nannette," she said, calling the girl back from the door; "you are very fond of Ruby—my darling—are you not?"

"Oh yes, my lady," returned the girl, "I love little Missy so well I could give my life for her."

Tears came into Irene's eyes.

"If I should die, was suddenly lost to her, Nannette," she said, huskily, "you would never let Ruby forget me, would you, my good girl?"

"Oh, my lady," cried the frightened maid, "you are ill, you *surely* are, or you would not talk like that."

"No, no, Nannette," returned Irene, "we all have sombre thoughts at times; you have always been kind to little Ruby," she went on, "and I want to show you that I appreciate it; take this little chain that you have always admired so much;" and she took from her own neck a dainty chain of exquisite workmanship, and clasped it about the girl's;" and whenever you look at it, remember it is in grateful acknowledgment of your love for my darling.

"There, do not say a word, Nannette, I will not hear one word of thanks. Light my reading-lamp and leave me."

"Shall I return, my lady?" asked Nannette.

"Not unless I call you," replied Irene.

Left to herself, Irene carefully closed and locked the

door, then glided swiftly across the room, flinging herself down on her knees by her child's couch.

There was no one to see how she caught up the tiny little form, weeping the wildest tears that ever fell from a woman's eyes.

"Mamma, is it *you?*" murmured little Ruby, sleepily, and the little head nestled to her shoulder, and two soft pink arms were flung about her neck.

"Oh, my darling! my darling!" sobbed Irene below her breath. "How can I leave you! I cannot, oh I cannot!" and she strained the child so tightly in her arms the little one cried out in sleepy wonder.

Irene unclasped the clinging arms, and laid the little one gently back in her pretty nest of lace and eider-down, sobbing pitifully over her the while.

Little Ruby, much to her relief, did not waken.

"Oh, my darling!" she moaned, swaying to and fro like a reed shaken by the wind, "I—your mother—am bidding you farewell, an eternal farewell, forever. I am leaving you in this hour, my darling, and it is tearing my heart-strings; it is more bitter than death.

"You will never know how I came and bent over you, my darling, my heart breaking in my bosom. The cruelest destiny that ever overtook a woman and hunted her down has overtaken me. I have sinned, but oh, my babe it was done in innocence, I knew not that that other one still lived when I wedded your papa. I thought, ah, Heaven, I call upon the listening angels to bear witness that I believed I was free—free!

"The horrible truth that that other one still lived, even though I had read of his death long before, fell upon me like the shock of doom, it drove me mad with horror; after all these years the horrible skeleton of the past has burst from its narrow confines and confronts me, tearing me from all that this life holds dear."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO LONDON BRIDGE AT MIDNIGHT?"

"We toil through pain and wrong
We fight and fly;
We love—we lose—and then ere long
Stone dead we lie.
O life! is all thy song—
Endure and die?"

NEVER since the flight of time began, did the stars, shining out from the blue heavens, drifting in through the half-drawn, filmy lace curtains, in a soft subdued light, fall upon a sadder sight than the beautiful woman kneeling with a death white face beside that little couch.

"Let me tear myself away while I have the strength to go," she murmured. "*He* said he was in honor bound to give my story broadcast to the world unless I parted from Frederick, and from you—his child. If I refused, it would mean disgrace, ruin for all, and Frederick would spurn me. Yes, I must go! I—*must* leave you!"

There could be no words of parting between Frederick and herself she well knew—she must write her farewell to him.

There was no pen and paper in the nursery. Irene touched the bell, and Nannette appeared at once.

"Nannette," she said, "go to my boudoir, to my writing-desk, and bring me pen, ink, and paper. There is a photograph of my—my husband, on the desk, fetch that, too; be quick."

A few moments later, the maid appeared with the articles, and again Irene dismissed her, though the girl would fain have lingered.

"My lady is going to write a letter and at this time in the evening, too, now why should she do that," muttered Nannette, "she knows it will not be posted before morning. I do hope she is not going to turn out a literary lady like the last mistress I lived with. Her bell was forever going

at all hours of the night and it was always :—'Bring me pen and paper, quick, Nannette, a thought is flying past me. I must seize it, quick, or it will dodge me.'"

Irene had closed and firmly fastened the door again, sat down at the table and with trembling hand commenced writing her letter to her husband.

It was very brief and said simply :—

"Frederick :—I have left you forever—when you read this I shall be far away. I have sinned; but oh, blame me not, for my little child's sake, whom I leave with you. All I ask is this, Frederick—it is my prayer—do not teach her to curse me. If you knew all, you might forgive me for going—for love's sake. There is no help for me.

Irene."

The lines were hurriedly written, and Irene, in her hurry, did not see that they could be interpreted as a strong confession of guilt.

Where could she place it—where his eyes would be likely to rest upon it at once when he entered the room as he always did to kiss little Ruby, awake or asleep, good-night—and the thought occurred to her to pin it to her darling's breast, and this she did; yes, he would be sure to see it *there*—at once.

Quickly Irene catches up the long, dark cloak and the plain hat, with the dark, heavy veil wound round it, which she had thrust behind the *portières* when she had entered the room, finding Nannette there, and hastily donned them; then gropes her way, like one fainting, back to the couch on which her darling lay—the little child which bound her heart to Frederick—the child she loved a thousand times dearer than her own life.

"Oh, my baby, good bye! Heaven watch over and comfort you, my helpless child," she sobbed, wildly. "You will never know how your poor mother's heart broke as she kissed you farewell. Ah, God! How can I leave you!"

Twice Irene crept to the door, and as many times turned back, to take one last look at the face dearer than all the world beside, to her.

A step on the stair startled her; the fatal moment of parting had come, she must tear herself away. When she had reached the door the third time, she fled swiftly

through it without one backward glance lest her courage should leave her.

Like a shadow she glided through the long corridors and out into the sweet, night air. No one who saw the silent figure, half hiding as she hurried swiftly along under the trees, and by the hedges, would ever have thought that it was Irene Esmond. She walked on quickly, meeting no one; nothing disturbed her, save that ever and anon, the rabbits leaped from their leafy coverts and darted across the path before her; or a startled night bird cried from its nest in the trees.

If anyone had mentioned to her long ago of a lady, delicate and dainty, walking through the lonely high-roads at night she would have wondered how it could be done without great fear; she seemed to have forgotten all fear. She remembered only one thing, she had parted from her husband and her little child forevermore, and never in this life would she see their faces again.

It did not occur to her where, or which way she was going. She had only one object in view, to walk along swiftly—to be so far away when morning dawned, they would never find her. She walked on, and on, and the great lights of London faded, slowly, one by one, in the distance, so it seemed to her. Her brain whirled; her mind seemed one chaos of confused thought. Where should she go? What could she do? In the distance she heard the murmur of rippling waters laving the shore, and walking on, she soon found herself at London Bridge.

Afar off a huge clock tolled the passing hour. It was midnight.

When Irene reached the centre of the great bridge she paused.

Ah, how calm the water with the great, deep dark shadows on it looked to her, and the stars twinkling in its waves seemed to be an inviting heaven below the waters. She stood there

> "Where the lamps quiver
> Far down in the river;
> Houseless and homeless
> She wandered by night."

Women passed her by with gilded hair, painted faces,

and tawdry finery; with light words on their wretched lips. Young girls went by with the laughter of demons coming from their young mouths. Men passed her by with sneers and jeers, and more than one comment on the beauty of her face. But Irene neither saw nor heard.

Suddenly, Irene saw a woman come hurriedly along the bridge, pause, and glance wildly about her. She did not see Irene, who stood near her in the thick, black shadow.

"Death is the end of life at the best," muttered the woman. "What does it matter that it is ended one time more than another; I am dying of hunger and of thirst; one splash and all will be over—one moment more and I shall be beyond sorrow." She drew her clothes tightly around her, and took the fatal plunge!—but, she did not go over the brink, down into the dark, glassy water, two white hands had clutched her and drawn her back from the very portals of death, and a voice cried out gaspingly:—

"What would you do, woman?"

"Leave an unkind world for—well, no matter what, or where. Perdition could not be worse than what I have had here. Who are you, who would hold me back from my purpose?" And two glaring, defiant eyes, glared into the white, beautiful face, looking with horror into her own.

It was Irene, who had rescued the woman. And for an instant, these two, *whose lives were destined to cross so strangely*—so wondrously—looked steadily into each other's faces.

"I am one as wretchedly unhappy as yourself," murmured Irene; "but great as my sorrow is, I could never seek to end it by taking my own life—'The Lord giveth—and the Lord taketh away,'" she quoted, gravely.

"What does it matter that I die now or to-morrow night—or the next day be found dead with the sun shining on my face; it would come to it by that time, for I am starving—do you hear, *starving*!' I havestood in the street for two days, supplicating work—alms—food at last, but people laughed as they passed me by. One woman got down from her coach and thrust a tract in my hand;—I dashed it into her face, crying out to her what I say to you. Don't talk religion to a starving woman—talk BREAD!"

"Come away from the water, you shall have food," replied Irene, forgetting for the moment her own sorrow in the abject misery of this forlorn creature. She followed Irene, with an eagerness pitiful to behold, to the nearest place where refreshments could be obtained. When the pangs of hunger had subdued, she turned to Irene with tears in her eyes. "You have put new life into my body. God bless you, lady! for you are a lady, I can see that—no matter what brought you to London Bridge at midnight."

Irene drew a bank-note from the well-filled purse she had taken the precaution to bring with her. "Take that," she said, pressing it into the other's hand, "it will keep you from hunger until you can find something to do."

With a quick, impulsive movement, the woman knelt down and kissed the hem of Irene's garment.

"Of all the world you alone have shown me a kindness. If I can ever repay it I will. I can never forget you, lady. Do not think I was always like this," she went on, "once I was as pretty a romping lass as ever the sun shone on. My curse was, that I married, and worshipped my husband. My devotion soon wearied him, and he deserted me. For ten years I searched the whole world over for him; and one day I met him in the streets of London. Wild with joy, I flew into his arms, he struck me, and spurned me from him. Mad with rage and pain, I picked up a stone and hurled it at him, and as I fled down the street, I heard some one crying out that I had put his eyes out—blinded him for life. I ran and ran, never turning back. I never saw him again.

"My name is on this envelope," she said, "if you should ever write to me to the address on there, I will get it. I found work there once, and there I shall seek work again."

Irene took it from her and without looking at it slipped it into her pocket. Thus they parted: Ah, if Irene had but glanced at that address;—had she but dreamed who that woman was, what a world of misery might have been spared her; but after all—

> "There is a destiny which shapes our ends,
> Rough hew them as we may."

CHAPTER XXIX.

TO THE FARMER'S DISMAY, HE CAME SUDDENLY UPON A YOUNG GIRL LYING SENSELESS AMONG THE CORN-FLOWERS IN THE MEADOW.

It was a long, dreary night,—on and on the lonely lady walked, surely the saddest creature on which the pitying moonlight ever fell. At length the first faint streaks of early day broke faint and pink with a tinge of gold in it, over the eastern hills.

How far Irene had traversed she never knew; there was a strange, terrible feeling in her head; a red mist seemed to float before her eyes and obscure everything; a sound like the rushing of waters filled her ears.

She hurried on through green meadows and bright, sunny fields where birds were singing, and children playing as though there was no such thing as sorrow in the world, sorrow more bitter than death.

She walked past them and the little children stopped from their play and gazed after the lovely, strange lady, whose eyes looked so strangely bright, and whose face was as white as death.

Irene reached a point where two roads met. It did not matter she told herself, which one she took, all places were the same to her. She walked down the high-road, then a lovely green lane charmed her—she crossed it, and found herself in a clover meadow, and through the trees she could see a farm-house. Although it was very early, the inhabitants were astir, a blue line of smoke curled heavenward from the old brick chimney, and the dairy maids with their pails over their white arms were hurrying forth to the morning's milking.

"Oh, how much I would give for a draught of new milk!" she thought, "for I am feeling weak and ill unto death." She remembered how long it was since she had tasted food or drink. "I must rest a moment before I shall be able to reach the farm house," she thought, and

with a sob of exhaustion Irene sunk down to rest among the blue bells that grew at the foot of an old oak tree, thinking the rest might do her good, might take the burning pain and heat from her brain, the cruel mist from her eyes.

She looked down the long, white, hard high-road she had come, little dreaming that she would never repass it.

The strangest sensations came over her; the earth and sky seemed to meet, the green world to whirl around her. It never occurred to her she was ill from long fasting, want of sleep, and sorrow. Strange fancies came to her, strange voices called her from the trees and hedges, strange faces leered at her from the green boughs; once or twice she cried aloud, then laughed at herself for her own fears; but the laughter died away and the fears grew greater.

Her hands were so cold—perhaps it was the cold, glistening dew in the hearts of the blue bells that had chilled them. Her head burned, and the breath that passed her lips seemed like a flame of fire.

The dark, curly head sunk lower until it rested on the long lush grass, her eyes closed to think.

The golden sun as it rose higher in the blue heavens fell upon the white, upturned face. Irene's hands were closely locked together, low moans issued from her white lips.

She tried to look the future in the face, the terrible future, but her thoughts wandered.

She closed her dazed eyes to the glare of the sunlight. She had a dim consciousness of hearing the blithe whistle of farm laborers as they crossed the fields to their work, then all became blank.

It happened quite by chance that Farmer Clyde and his wife crossed the clover fields that morning. They were in a high dispute in regard to money matters as usual.

"Those clover fields want mowing, and then there is the haymakers that will have to be paid off to-night. No, Marthy, no; the new gowns for the girls must wait a bit."

"Depend on it, Jonas, the girls shall have it," declared his wife, energetically. "There's to be a grand picnic in the village a week from to-day; Squire Jones' daughters

will be there, the Higgins girls, with their fine new spring hats, the Lane's and the Pendleton's—all the best people hereabouts—and d'ye think, Jonas, I'll let *my* girls go lookin' like dowdys? I guess not!"

"But money's so tight, Marthy," grumbled the farmer.

"It is when it gets into *your* clutches," retorted his wife. "But now mark me, Jonas, I'll have the girls a new gown apiece or I'll know the reason why. Thar'll be war, Jonas, do you hear,—war, I'll—"

The wife's shrill tongue came to a sudden standstill—something very like a gasp broke from her lips. Her sharp eyes had discerned something very like the outlines of a human form lying among the tall grass.

"Jonas," she cried shrilly, grasping the farmer's arm in affright, "what on earth is that?"

"It looks like the figure of a woman!" exclaimed the astonished farmer.—"Why, by George it *is* a woman," he cried, quickly, as he gained the spot, his wife close at his heels.

In a moment the farmer's wife was down on her knees beside the prostrate form, pushing the dark, damp curls back from the white face. "It's a young girl!" she cried. "Oh Jonas, do look and see how pretty she is, her face is like an angel's. What are you standing there staring for, with your hands in your pockets?" she demanded, sharply.

"Pick her up and bring her to the house, I'll see what can be done for the poor lass."

"Wouldn't it be better, Marthy, if we took the girl down to the village tavern?" mildly suggested the farmer.

"Will you hold your tongue, Jonas, and do as you are bid?" cried his wife. "The tavern, indeed, for that grasping old landlord to run up a bill on the poor, pretty creature, when like as not she hasn't a cent in her pocket. Lift her up, and be lively, too; don't you see she's in a dead faint?"

The angry light in the dark eyes turned upon him, warned the farmer that it were better to obey without further remonstrance. He plainly saw that his wife had made up her mind.

He lifted the slim figure with alacrity, and in a few minutes they had reached the farm-house, cutting across lots through the wheat fields.

A young girl sat on the low steps of the porch paring apples. She sprung to her feet, scattering the fruit in all directions, and staring in amazement at the strange spectacle that met her view—her father striding hurriedly along the path bearing a girlish figure in his arms, her mother following up the rear.

"For mercy sake, pa!" exclaimed the young girl, "who in the world have you got there? Who is she, and what's the matter with her?"

"Molly!" exclaimed her mother, sharply, "you are like your father, for all the world. Stop staring and asking questions. Run quick, and see if there is hot water on the stove, and bring me the peppermint-bottle and the mustard-jar, towels, hot blankets, and help me get this poor, young creature's clothes off and into bed, and—"

"Don't give the girl so many orders at once, mother," expostulated the farmer. "Don't you see you have muddled her head so she don't know what to do first."

The good woman started kitchenward in high dudgeon.

"It's always the way; if I want anything done, I have to do it, myself!" she cried, angrily. "You two are a pretty pair of drawbacks for a smart woman like me to be tied to!"

And she flounced out of the best room, leaving the lovely stranger to the care of curious Molly.

She returned almost immediately, fairly loaded down with bottles, blankets and et ceteras.

The farmer was hastily invited to vacate the room; then the work of restoring the beautiful stranger began at once.

Slowly the dark eyes opened. It was pitiful to see the great tear drops standing on the long, dark lashes.

"I'm afraid the poor thing has the fever," exclaimed the farmer's wife, pityingly. "If she has, she won't be able to leave her bed for many a long day."

The beautiful eyes regarded her with a frightened look in their dark depths, the crimson lips babbled empty nothings. Now and then a word or a sentence could be distinguished. "Life was so hard to bear," the quivering lips muttered over and over again.

"Why," said the farmer's wife suddenly, as she gazed on the little white hand straying restlessly to and fro on the coverlet, "I have been taking her for a young girl—

she is married. Look, Molly, she wears a wedding ring. I am afraid the poor, pretty creature has seen some great trouble," Mrs. Clyde concluded, and her kind, motherly heart went out to her in warmest sympathy.

"Are you going to let her stay here, mother?" asked Molly.

"Do you think I would turn her out into the high-road?" inquired the farmer's wife, curtly.

"You have forgotten about Jack, mother," the girl said. "He will be home to-night. This stranger looks so much like—*her*."

For an instant the color left the ruddy face of Mrs. Clyde.

"Ah! I *had* forgotten Jack," she muttered, under her breath, "still, it cannot be helped *now*. She can be taken to *your* room, Molly, and Jack can come and go without having seen her, or even knowing a stranger is beneath this roof."

"Ah, mother," whispered Molly, "think what would happen if he should by any chance discover her."

"There is but one thing we could do," returned her mother, "and that is—to face the matter, Molly. This poor girl cannot help it if her face does resemble—that other one."

The farmer was quickly summoned, and wrapped in the long, coarse, warm blankets, Irene was conveyed to Molly's room, and not a moment too soon, for as they were descending the stairway, the sound of carriage wheels was heard without, and an open buggy dashed up to the front porch, and, throwing the reins to a boy who had come up from the fields, a young man sprung from the vehicle, and strode into the pleasant, airy kitchen.

"Father—mother—girls—where are you?" cried the young man, in a deep, impatient voice.

"It is—Jack," murmured the farmer's wife, hurrying forward.

CHAPTER XXX.

"YOU MUST FORGET HER; HER LOVE IS NOT FOR YOU."

THE home to which fate had drifted Irene, had never had but one shadow cross it, and it had happened in this way. Only two summers before, strangers from London had answered the old farmer's advertisement that he would take a private family to board for the summer at the farm-house. And a few days later, a London lawyer, his wife, and daughter arrived. The girl was as beautiful as a dream; no wonder she took the hearts of those who saw her by storm at first sight.

"I am sure I shall die of *ennui*," groaned the lovely heiress, as she walked under the blossoming apple boughs with Molly. "What amusements do you have here?"

"Amusements?" echoed Molly; "why Spelling-Bees, once in a while, a picnic in Piney Woods, and balls."

"A country ball," murmured the young lady; "ugh. I can imagine nothing so stupid. Are there any young gentleman about?"

"No not for miles around, except my brother Jack," replied the girl."

"A farmer, I suppose," returned her companion, elevating her dainty, arched brows.

"Unfortunately, no; Jack hates farming," replied Molly; "he pleaded so hard with father and mother to be allowed to go to college, that they consented. Jack is what we are not—educated."

Her companion laughed; her black eyes gleamed. Ah, well, a college fellow was better to flirt with than no fellow at all during those long, monotonous summer days.

She was rather pleased with the great, tall, stalwart, handsome Jack, when she saw him, and he did just exactly what she expected him to do—fell head over ears in love with her at first sight.

There were long days spent under the blossoming apple trees; in the sweet-smelling orchard; long rambles in the deep stillness of the gloaming, and in the moonlight, listening to the nightingale sing in the tanglewood; long hours spent rowing on the little lake that reflected the stars of heaven that twinkled in the blue dome overhead; drives over the pleasant country roads, all too enchanting to this honest-hearted youth, who found heaven on earth, in the glances of a girl's dark, dreamy eyes.

The summer days came to an end all too soon, and the lawyer and his family returned to London.

Oh, dark days to Jack Clyde; he found life unendurable without the girl he had learned to love.

A few months later, he went on to London, heavy-hearted, because his numerous letters had never been replied to, seeking the lawyer's daughter at her magnificent city home at once, upon his arrival.

He reached the mansion just as the young girl was coming down the marble steps, leaning upon the arm of a young and handsome man, and the sight nearly took Clyde's breath away, with jealousy and fear.

He sprung before her, holding out his hand, entreatingly, to her, huskily calling her by name.

She gave him one cold, stony glance of haughty surprise, and drew back her dainty skirts from contact with his dusty, travel-stained clothes.

"Do nothing with the fellow—let him pass on," she said, calmly, to her frowning escort; "he is a person whom I met at Beech Grove, while summering there, and to whom I was civil; he has taken advantage of it, as people of that class generally do." And she passed on, leaving Jack Clyde standing there with his heart turned to stone in his bosom. Even in that moment, the lines swept through his brain:

"—— Oh, night, did you say
My love had grown false to me?
That her vows like a breath passed away,
As the blossoms fall from a tree?
Was it the wind said—'Thy love is gone?"
False wind, thou wert never true!
The whippoorwill plaints for the dawn;
Poor soul; was your love false, too?"

From that moment Jack Clyde had a fierce hatred of women, in general—dark-eyed ones especially.

No wonder his mother and sister trembled as they noticed how like the beautiful young stranger was in form and feature to "that other one," as they always called her nowadays.

By chance Jack discovered the stranger's presence in their household; in passing his sister Molly's door, he had stopped a moment to wish her good-night, and stood staring in the most undisguised amazement from the threshold, at the lovely young creature on the white couch, over whom his mother and Molly were bending.

His mother hurried to his side in great anxiety; and, in a few brief words, the situation was explained to Jack.

"You know I couldn't do different than to take this poor, pretty stranger in, Jack," said his mother, in a hesitating, apologetic tone; "could I?"

"No—I suppose not," he answered, thus directly appealed to.

"You are not so *very* angry are you, Jack?" she asked, earnestly.

"Why, how could I be, under the circumstances, mother," he responded.

As the days rolled by, contrary to Mrs. Clyde's expectation, Jack took quite an interest in the fair stranger.

For long weeks Irene lay between life and death in the humble farm-house, and as the days dragged their slow length by, the mother's eyes were opened, at length, to a strange discovery, and that was, that her son had learned to love, with all the deep, passionate love of his heart, the lovely stranger, fate had placed in their care.

"I can scarcely believe it," she muttered to herself, when the idea first presented itself to her mind; "that was the rock on which he fell once before; surely he will know better than to stumble against it a second time—yet, with most men, once a fool, always a fool, where a pretty face is concerned."

"When do you think she will regain consciousness, mother?" Jack asked, one day. "Poor girl! her ravings cut me to the heart."

"The ravages of the fever will not last much longer," she returned. "I should say in a very few days now the crisis will have been passed and she will be on the mend.

It will not be very long then before she is ready to leave us."

"Leave us!" he echoed, starting from his chair, and she saw a sudden pallor cross the brownness of her boy's cheek.

"Did you expect her to stay here forever? she asked, sharply. "She must have a home somewhere, and people who are most anxious over her."

"I had not thought of that. I did not look at the future, only the present," he said, very slowly; and the keen ears, listening, detected a great huskiness in his usually cheery voice.

The farmer's wife walked quickly to her boy's side and placed her hands on his broad shoulders.

"Let me give you a word of advice, Jack," she said, slowly; "do not fall in love with this beautiful stranger, for a fine lady like that is not for you, for she is a fine lady; her hands are like velvet, and her clothes cost more money than we have ever seen. Take your mother's advice, do not let your heart go out to her. There is a very good reason why you should not care for her," Mrs. Clyde went on. "She's married, Jack."

"Married!" he ejaculated, fairly springing from his seat; "why what makes you think so, mother?"

"On the day she was brought here she wore a wedding-ring on her finger," said Mrs. Clyde; "it fell from her hand, and I put it away for her until she recovers. That is why I repeat to you, my son, do not let your heart go out to her."

Mrs. Clyde's warning had come too late. Her son's heart had gone out to Irene, with a passionate love that frightened even himself by its intensity.

He began to look forward with dread to the hour when she would leave them.

It was at the end of the third week that Irene awoke to the realization of events transpiring about her.

"Am I awake, or—or—dreaming?" she murmured, faintly, struggling up to a sitting posture, and gazing in bewilderment about her; her glance resting upon the honest, toil-worn faces, grouped about the unfamilar room.

Mrs. Clyde was by her side in an instant.

"Of course you don't know where you are, dearie," she said, "this is a strange place to you. We found you lying

in a nest of blue bells in the clover meadow, under the old oak tree. You was in a deep swoon. My husband picked you up and brought you here—that was nigh onto three weeks ago. You've been here ever since, down with the brain fever; why, there was one time we thought you were going to die, we did indeed, dearie."

"Oh, why did you save me!" sobbed Irene, turning her face to the wall. "It would have been a deed of mercy to let me die."

The good woman was greatly shocked. "You must have had a deep sorrow in your life, to say such words as those," she said.

"I have had one of the cruelest, most bitter sorrows that ever wrecked a life," moaned Irene; "and the world narrowed down to a grave. That is all I can say for myself."

"Have you friends in this part of the country, if I may make bold enough to ask?" enquired the farmer's wife, pityingly.

Irene shook her dark, curly head, drearily. "I am cast adrift from home and friends—forever," she sobbed. "In all the wide world, no young girl ever met with such a strange and cruel fate as I met with. I never offended Heaven to deserve it; then why was such woe visited upon me? It was unjust!"

"God knows best why," said the farmer's wife. "If I could give you a word of advice, I would say:—go back to your home and your friends; no matter what caused you to leave them."

"You mean well. Your advice is kind; but you do not know all," murmured Irene, burying her face in her hands. "I can never go back. All the bridges are burned behind me. No one who ever knew me shall see my face again."

Their entreaties to tell them whom she was, and from whence she came met with a firm denial.

"Know me only as Irene—a hapless stranger to whom you was kind," she said, "and after I have gone from you, pray for me, as you would pray for a lost soul in great danger."

And those strange words haunted the farmer's wife for many a long day after.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IRENE MEETS WITH A GREAT SURPRISE.

"You must not talk any more now, my dear," said Mrs. Clyde, soothingly, "if you do, all the good effects of the medicine that has been given you will be lost.

"You have such a good, kind doctor, dearie," she went on, "and he takes such an interest in you. It is strange how we happened to find out about this doctor," she went on, "it came about in this way :—

"Only yesterday, a young man rode up to the old well by the roadside, and asked if he might water his horse. Jonas—that's my husband—fetched a pail, and just then they noticed the horse was lame.

"'You'd better stop with us for the night, sir,' says Jonas,—'that beast needs a rest.' He was impatient to be moving on, but he saw for himself Jonas was right.

"'I cannot give you much accommodations,' Jonas went on, apologetically—'for the best room in our little farm-house has already been given up to a stranger—a young woman whom we picked up ill by the roadside. She has been here nigh onto death, ever since.'

"In an instant he was all attention. How he questioned Jonas. Why one would have thought he had never heard of such a thing as a woman fainting, then being taken with a fever; but we soon found out why he was so anxious to know all about it—he turned out to be a doctor.

"He declared that he must see you, right away, which was done; and he gave you such powerful medicine, that you were helped right away, as he said you would be.

"'Have her dressed and propped up with pillows, sitting in that chair when I come to see her to-morrow morning,' he said, pointing to the one by the window there. So, to carry out his instructions I must have you up and dressed—at once."

To this Irene gladly consented.

She did not realize until she attempted to walk across the floor, just how weak she was.

"Would you like me to get you a little hand-glass to show you just how lovely you look, Irene?" asked Mrs. Clyde.

"It does not matter," returned Irene, wearily.

But she was a little surprised at the face that looked out at her from the little cracked mirror, when the good farmer's wife brought the glass. A face white as a snow-drop, with great, staring, mournful dark eyes, looking out from it—a face all framed in clusters of dark brown curls that gave to it an infantile beauty.

Irene raised her hand quickly to her head.

"Your head had to be shorn of all its beautiful long, dark hair," said Mrs. Clyde; "but really, you look a thousand times prettier now—just like a school-girl."

At that moment the sound of a child's laugh fell upon Irene's ear; she started up with a low cry.

"I hope my little girl did n't annoy you," said Mrs. Clyde, "I will tell her she must go and play on the other side of the house."

"Oh, by no means!" exclaimed Irene, "I—I—should like to hear the child's voice; it would be great comfort to me to watch her at play; I—I—should like to hold your little girl in my arms a moment; may I?"

Mrs. Clyde called the little one; and a bonny little lass of some four or five summers responded, coming timidly into the room. It was a mere coincidence that she should be Ruby's age, with Ruby's flaxen curls, great red cheeks and large, dark eyes.

The child with a cry of "Mamma!" ran to Mrs. Clyde, who clasped her in her arms. Irene sat silent, unable to speak, white and trembling with agitation. She did not realize when she made the request to see the little child, how the sight would effect her.

"Go to the lady, Dora," said Mrs. Clyde, and the child timidly approached Irene.

With trembling hands Irene lifted her on her knee, with trembling lips she kissed the pretty baby face; her whole soul shone in her eyes as she talked to her.

"Do you like little children?" asked Mrs. Clyde.

"I love them," faltered Irene, and as she looked at

the child, Irene thought of Ruby—her own darling—whom she was to see never again in this world; and the thought was so bitter it almost killed her—she fell back in her seat, white as death.

The farmer's wife took the child from Irene's clinging arms—quite frightened at the change in her.

"Run away, Dora," she said, "you tire the lady; you are too heavy to have climbed on her knee."

"Let her stay," said Irene, piteously.

But at that moment, through the open doorway, Mrs. Clyde had beheld the doctor coming up the stairs.

"Ah, the doctor comes," she said; "she shall come back after he goes, if you like," and she led the little one from the room as the doctor entered.

Irene had turned her face to the window; her thoughts engrossed in ruminating over the past—all unconscious that some one had crossed the room and was standing close by her chair. Suddenly a hand fell lightly on her shoulder and a voice whispered hoarsely the name—"Irene."

She turned with a cry of amazement, uttering faintly:—"Dr. Ross!"

"Irene," he said, hoarsely, "thank Heaven I have found you—*at last.*"

She looked at him with bewildered, dilated eyes.

"Have you been looking for me?" she asked, incoherently, and a wild hope sprung up in her heart, that, perhaps Frederick had sent him; that he bore some message from him. She was not to be kept in suspense long.

"I have searched all London over for you, Irene," he said; "I was just about giving up in despair. You—you should have told me your destination."

"Why should that interest *you?*" she asked, wonderingly.

"It interested me as nothing else in this world could, Irene."

She rose to her feet, drew her slender form up, haughtily. "I would beg that you do not make use of the name Irene, in addressing me in future," she said, "please to remember I am Mrs. Esmond, Dr. Ross."

"Pardon me, if I refuse to admit that," he said with a slow, insolent, cruel smile, creeping round his mustached lips.

She shrunk from him as though he had struck her a blow. Poor soul, *she had forgotten!*

"It was cruel to taunt me with *that*," she sobbed.

"Forgive me; you forced the words from my lips," he said.

"You will tell me why you have been searching for me," asked Irene.

"Simply because I did not wish to lose sight of you," he returned, flushing under the clear, wondering gaze of the dark eyes turned upon him.

"It was by the merest chance I happened to run across you, and learned you had been lying ill here three weeks. You cannot know," he went on, "what has been transpiring in London since you left."

"No," she murmured.

He drew a London paper from his pocket, pointing to a marked paragraph.

"Read that," he said.

Quickly Irene's eyes devoured it; and as she read, the cold dew of agony gathered over her face; her white lips twitched, and her little hands clenched themselves together, tightly. She did not cry out, or utter any moan, but it seemed to her in that moment, she was dying.

It was but a short paragraph and read as follows:—

"Our readers will doubtless remember the sudden flight of the beautiful and accomplished young wife of Mr. Frederick Esmond, the well-known safe manufacturer of Oxford Street, which was duly chronicled in these columns at the time, and which created a profound sensation. It has since been ascertained the young husband has commenced suit for an absolute divorce, and prays for the custody of the child."

No word broke from Irene's lips; she sat staring at the paper like one turned to stone.

"You expected that, did you not?" asked Ross.

"No," she whispered in a heart-broken voice.

"You and I know that that step was unnecessary," pursued Ross, "even though Esmond does not."

She looked at him, with the gaze of a wounded fawn, who raises its humid eyes to the hand that has slain it.

"Do you know what I thought—the thought that has lived in my heart ever since I read that?" he asked.

There was no answer from her lips, and he went on:—

"I thought if you were to pursue the same course in regard to—to—Forrester, you would be free."

He saw her shudder as though an icy wind had swept over her.

"And if you were free, Irene, I would dare tell you how much you are to me," he said, hoarsely, carried away at that moment in spite of himself by his deep love for her.

"I will hold out my arms to you crying out, be *my* wife, darling, I have always loved you; I—"

"Stop!" That one word that fell from her lips, sounded like nothing human. As he spoke he had attempted to take the little hand lying on the back of the chair to which she had been clinging for support. He never forgot in all the long years of his after-life, the stormy beauty of the face turned toward him. The picture as he saw it then never faded from his memory.

The slender figure in the gray dress that fell about her in graceful folds, the simple white rosebud at her throat, and the background of white rosebuds that clambered round the open window by which she stood.

He attempted to speak; but she held up her white hand—a silent command that he should not utter another word.

"Are you—are you daring to hint at the possibility of my ever marrying you?" she asked.

"I am, indeed, so brave," he declared, angered at the loathing on her beautiful face.

"Then take my answer," she cried. "In the sight of God and man, I am Frederick Esmond's wife, and shall be while I live! The law may set it aside;—but that will never change it as it is written in the record-book in Heaven, by the recording angel who saw and who knows all!"

"In the face of all that pretty sentiment, what of Leon Forrester?" asked Dr. Victor Ross, maliciously.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"WILL YOU MAKE OF ME A FRIEND OR AN ENEMY?"

DR. Ross saw the question strike Irene as lightning strikes a fair flower; she shrunk from him, her eyes dilating with horror, her lips moved but no sound came from them.

"You are cruel," she gasped, at length. "It is unmanly to torture a weak woman as you are doing now. If you would not have me despise you utterly—leave me, —and—and—I will try to forget that you have so far insulted me as to dare speak to me of love."

She had stung his pride. He took a step nearer her with blazing, wrathful eyes, and for a few moments they looked at each other steadily.

"My love an insult!" he repeated, hoarsely, "take care, Irene, you are speaking words which I shall never be able to forget."

"I do not wish you to forget them, Dr. Ross," she answered, proudly. "I wish you to remember always, every word I have said, that such a scene may never be repeated."

He gazed at her steadily—the lovely, frowning, averted face, the scornful, curling lips, and anger dilated, dark eyes.

"There is such a thing as the most intense love changing in a single moment to *hatred*," he said, in a hoarse voice; "take care that you do not make an enemy of me, Irene."

"It would not make the slightest possible difference to me," returned Irene, haughtily, "the enmity of a man so lost to honor as you have shown yourself to be, does not count for much."

These were the cold, cutting words that changed his love in a breath, to undying hatred.

"Every time I think of you or look in your face this

scene will recur to me," he said, hoarsely. "I will make you rue this hour, my haughty Irene, I will trample your heart beneath my feet to the very dust as you have trampled mine. *I know a way.* My love an insult, indeed! No doubt you look forward to a reconciliation with Esmond, but let me warn you—that shall never be —never!"

Weak as she was, Irene rose to her feet.

"Go!" she said, pantingly, pointing to the door, "never let me see your face again."

"I go," he said, mockingly, turning back to add tauntingly, as he paused on the threshold, "you will hear from me quite unexpectedly in the near future."

How little Irene dreamed how soon, and under what thrilling circumstances it would be.

She heard the sound of his quick, ringing tread as he passed down the stairway, and a little later the sound of his horse's hoofs as he galloped away, and she knew he had left the farm-house.

She made no mention of ever having met and known the young doctor to Mrs. Clyde, when the farmer's wife bustled into the room a little later, announcing with much regret that the doctor had declared he could linger no longer, much as he was interested in his fair patient, and had taken his departure.

Dr. Ross had taken the first train back to London, and when he reached there, the first person whom he met as he stepped from the railway carriage was—Frederick Esmond.

Ere we relate the thrilling scene which followed, we must go back a little in our narrative, to the fatal day and hour when Esmond had discovered Irene's flight.

Scarcely twenty minutes had elapsed from the time Irene had left the house, ere Esmond entered.

"Is your mistress in the library, or drawing-room?" he asked of the footman, to whom he handed his hat and cane.

"I have not seen her, sir," responded the man. "I do not think she has come down from her apartment since her guests left."

Esmond passed up the stairway, and down the long corridor leading to his wife's boudoir, and tapped lightly

on the door. There was no answer, and as the door was ajar he pushed it open and entered.

"Irene is not here," he said to himself, glancing around the dainty blue and gold apartment.

He threw himself down on one of the blue silk lounging chairs by the mosaic centre table, and drew from his pocket a square leather case.

"How surprised Irene will be to know that I have brought her that diamond necklace she was admiring so much at Courtney's," he thought, rising from his chair and crossing to the window. He drew aside the lace curtains and looked carelessly out into the still beauty of the tranquil night.

How brightly the moon shone down upon the earth, bathing the trees, the flowers, and white, winding road beyond the park, in its white, silvery light. How the golden stars glowed in the blue sky. The birds had sought their nests long since among the leafy branches of the acacia trees.

The flowers had folded the dewdrops close to their hearts with their tender petals, and were rocked to sleep by the tender night wind.

Esmond gazed on the fair scene with a smile on his lips.

"How contented a man feels with a happy home of his own—with a dear wife and family to occupy his thoughts and attention," he ruminated; "as Irene said to-day, there has been no wish of her life that I have not fulfilled if it lay within my power—my beautiful, bonny Irene!"

He left the window, and walked back to his seat, touching the little silver hand-bell, impatiently, to which Nannette the maid responded from the nursery adjoining.

"Tell your mistress that I am here, Nannette," he said; but before giving the girl time to execute this mission he went on—

"Has little Ruby retired yet?"

"Missy, oh, yes, sir; she was put to bed 'most an hour ago, bless her dear, little heart," answered Nannette. "Don't you see her, sir?" she added, pointing through the *portières* that were drawn back, revealing a large portion of the inner room, and the low, French bed, with the little curly head half buried in the eider-down pillows.

"Bless my soul, I did not notice," responded Esmond.

"My mistress has gone out, sir," said Nannette.

"Gone out!" repeated Esmond, in astonishment; "why that is strange, when did she go out, Nannette."

"But a little while ago, sir," answered the maid, "I knew she was going out when I met her in the corridor, because she wore her long silk cloak, with the dark crimson hood. I spoke to her, but she neither saw nor heard me."

"You may go, Nannette," said Esmond; "not there," as she turned to the nursery again, "but to your own room; I will ring for you when you are wanted. I do not anticipate that you will be wanted, however, if Ruby is asleep."

The girl courtesied, and quitted the boudoir.

"How strange that Irene has gone out at this hour of the night," he thought, wonderingly. "It is an uncommon thing for her to do. And she has left me no word—no message—stranger still. No doubt she has been sent for by some one hereabouts, who is ill—every one loves her so well;" and his mind reverted to a poor, young girl who, on her death-bed, had pleaded that Mrs. Esmond might sit beside her, holding her hand while her poor life drifted out. Irene had always been so kind to this girl.

Twenty minutes passed—half an hour—still, Irene did not return.

Esmond grew impatient.

He saw a book on the table, and mechanically picked it up and opened it, to see what Irene had been reading, turning it to the book-mark, placed between the pages.

A few lines of poetry met his eyes; he glanced over them, recognizing the words of an old hymn:

"There is a time, we know not when,
A point we know not where,
That marks the destiny of men
To glory or despair.

"There is a line by us unseen,
That crosses every path;
That hidden boundary between
God's patience and his wrath.

"How far may we go on in sin?
How long will God forbear?
Where does hope end? and where begin—
The confines of despair?"

Esmond closed the book; he was in no mood for reading.

The pearl and gold clock on the marble mantel, chimed slowly the hour of ten.

Esmond rose from his seat and began to pace nervously up and down the room.

"She might have known I should feel worried about her going out, and not knowing where she has gone," he thought, impatiently.

Esmond felt exceedingly annoyed over the matter; during all the years of their wedded life he had never known her to do anything like this.

"She must be here very soon, now," he thought; and it occurred to him he could pass the time no better than by looking in at little Ruby.

Entering the nursery he passed to the little couch on which his little daughter lay, and stood gazing long and earnestly upon the flushed, dimpled face of the little sleeper.

"How much that little darling looks like Irene," he mused. "There are the same dark eyebrows, and long, dark curling-lashes; the same graceful poise of the dark, curly head, and the same smiling mouth—like crimson flowers as some graceful writer puts it.

He bent down and kissed the fair love locks, that trailed over the lace pillow, very lightly, that he might not waken little Ruby, and as he did so, he caught sight of the letter pinned to Ruby's breast, directed to himself, in Irene's handwriting. There was no mistaking that fine delicate chirography.

A broad laugh broke over his lips,—now what was the meaning of this—Irene was as full of tricks as a mischievous school-girl.

Esmond glanced sharply about him—expecting to see a pair of dark eyes laughing at him from some remote corner.

"A reminder, no doubt, that to-morrow is our little

Ruby's birthday," he thought, "and mentioning something she would like me to buy her. Yes, our little Ruby is four years old to-morrow, bless her. Ah, how quickly happy years spent with one we love pass."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"I WOULD NOT FORGIVE HER, THOUGH SHE PLEADED WITH ME ON HER BENDED KNEES."

"Like the snowflake on the river,
A moment white—then gone forever."

ALL thoughtless of the blow that awaited him, Esmond returned, letter in hand, to the outer room, and once more threw himself down in Irene's favorite chair, and leisurely broke the seal, drawing forth the dainty, perfumed, monogram sheet.

As his eye runs over the contents swiftly, his face is a study.

He springs from his seat holding the letter out at arm's length from him, horror, amazement, bewilderment, depicted on his countenance.

Once, twice, thrice, he read the letter through, the lines standing out like letters of fire on the white page; then it fell from his nerveless hands to the floor.

He was a strong man and a brave man, but his hands trembled, his face blanched, great drops of agony stood out on his brow, his lips were white and parched.

"My God!" he cried, hoarsely, "this cannot be true. It is false."

"Gone," he repeated, "what nonsense. She is *not* gone," he articulated in a voice of thunder, that startled even the servants on the floor above out of their sleep.

Then he laughed aloud. She was in her own room, which was just off the nursery, of course. Irene gone! No, no. It was an evil dream; he must shake it off. He sank back into his chair with another hoarse guffaw of laughter, more horrible to hear than cries would have been.

"Ha! ha! ha! how foolish I am; for one half moment I almost believed it. Of course, it is a jest of Irene's—a little scheme to try my confidence in her. No doubt

she is watching me from behind those *portières*," he added, *sotto voce.*

"Irene! Irene—I say," he cried, throwing back his fair, handsome head, with a forced laugh. "Come, now, this is rather unkind of you, my darling."

There was no reply. The silence that followed was broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantel, and by the throbbing of his own heart.

He hurried to the silken hangings, drawing them aside with a shaking hand.

No slim, girlish figure glided into his outstretched arms, with a gay, merry laugh.

"Irene!" he cried, excitedly. "Come here, I say—I am in no mood for light jesting. I do not fancy it. Come, and be rewarded by seeing what I have bought for you."

But no Irene replied. Only the clock with its slow, measured ticking, and his own loudly pulsing heart, broke the silence, as he listened intently for the second time.

He turned the knob of the door quickly, which led to the inner apartment; a chill cold as death swept over him, for he saw in a glance the utter confusion of the apartment. Bureaus are open, trunks ransacked, and wardrobe empty—all standing wide open.

There was no sight under heaven more pathetic than the sight of that empty room; everywhere he turned, he saw traces of her presence—a tiny slipper with a rosette on it, lying on a hassock, a bracelet and a fan lying on the dressing case, a pretty home dress of mull and lace she had worn only that afternoon, lying across the dainty bed, and on the table a bouquet of her favorite roses; they had not yet commenced to wither.

"Irene!" he cried again, but only the night wind among the clambering roses outside the casement answered him, seemingly like the moan of a human soul outside in the night.

"The room is as cold as death!" he cried, leaning heavily back against the wall. All his passionate love for his fair, young wife stirred in his heart, his breath came in great mighty gasps. How he yearned for her presence! He would have given twenty years of his life, at *that moment, to* have clasped her in his arms, strained *her to his* agonized breast, felt the warm, glowing, dim-

pled cheek lying against his own, and the clasp of her white, soft arms round his neck.

Should he never see her again—never look upon the face that was dearer than the whole world to him?

"My God! can it be true that she has indeed left me?" he cried, incoherently, putting his hand to his forehead, and brushing the great beads of dew from it. "If I thought it was—"

"Ah, my God!" he cried, pacing the floor to and fro, like one driven suddenly mad. "What did she mean by kissing me so repeatedly when she returned from that hospital trip, and crying out when I left her —'Good-bye, Frederick—good-bye?'

"I saw her with her face pressed close against the pane watching me out of sight as the carriage whirled down the drive.

"Oh, Heaven! it *is* true; Irene has left me—I feel it in my heart. It is no jest—it is a horrible reality. Oh, Irene!—Irene!—Irene!—my wife!"

He falls heavily into the nearest seat—buries his face in his hands, while sobs, that are no disgrace to his noble manhood, convulsed his strong frame.

"——Talk not of grief 'till ye have seen
The tears of warlike men——"

The extraordinary commotion awakened Ruby; she sat bolt upright in her bed, her great, dark eyes, staring open in infantile dismay.

The sight of Esmond sitting there—sobbing, her handsome, genial papa *in tears*, is a sight Ruby has never beheld in all her young life before.

"Papa—papa," she cries, in her shrill voice, "are you ill? Oh, papa, *are* you?"

Esmond springs to the couch and snatches the child in his arms with so quick a movement as to almost take her breath away, seats her on his knee, holding her at arm's length from him. Ill! He thinks what was all the illness of the body in this world to the torture of mind he was suffering then.

"Papa, do not look at me so—so strange, your eyes look wild, papa; just like the old duke's after he has drank brandy with lots of lumps of sugar in it. Oh, papa, *what do those* awful eyes mean?"

He was looking down into the lovely infantile face, so lovely, and ah God! so much like Irene's, with all his soul in that concentrated gaze.

"It means—oh, my darling, it means that your mother has left us,—and *you* are a deserted child!"

And as he utters the horrible words, deep sobs shake his frame again.

Ruby looks up at him with wide-open puzzled eyes; her father's manner frightened her.

"Do you comprehend, my darling?" he asks, with a groan. "Do you realize what papa is telling you?"

And he strained her to his heart covering her little face, her shining hair, and her dimpled hands with burning kisses.

"I want mamma," she cried, attempting to struggle from his embrace; "you squeeze me so awfully, papa, you hurt me. Is mamma coming?"

Esmond released her.

"Your mamma is never coming to you again, Ruby," he cried, hoarsely and fiercely. "You must forget her. Do you understand? you must forget her, I say."

"I'm just as sure as ever I can be, that you've been drinking brandy and lumps of sugar, papa," declared Ruby, decisively. Nannette always says when people talk funny and look wild out of their eyes, they're toxi—toxi—topsipated."

"You must learn to forget your mother," commanded Esmond, never heeding the child's remarks—"forget that she has ever lived as I will do. I will tear her image from my bosom, though my heart be at the root."

He seats the child on a hassock, and at that moment the letter catches his eye again.

He picks it up voluntarily and reads it over to himself again, and as he reads he clenches his hands together, his face pales to a dead white; rage is getting the better of his terrible grief—it is better so.

He rings the bell violently for Nannette, and in a moment more, that young person responds; but she shrinks back in dismay as she crosses the threshold and observes her master standing there in such a towering rage; and little Ruby wide-awake, sitting huddled in her night-robe on the hassock.

"Did you want me, sir?" she asked, timidly.

"Yes," said Esmond, huskily. "I want you to take care of my child, Nannette, until I come back; promise me, faithfully, you will do this. Mrs.—Mrs.—Esmond has gone away—never to return!"

The girl looked at him in dismay; something of an inkling of what was transpiring about her, occurred to her.

"Do you promise?" he asked, harshly.

"Yes, sir," she replied—"but I—"

"Silence," he cried, so stormily she could scarcely realize it was kind, happy Mr. Esmond who spoke to her so sternly.

"Oh, papa, papa, where are you going?" cried Ruby, springing up from the hassock, and catching at her father's hand—"tell me, papa; where are you going?"

Heedless of Nannette's presence, he caught the child up in his arms, and answered her.

"I am going to search for your faithless mother," he cried, "pursue her—not to forgive her and take her back. She has gone from me deliberately and without cause, and though she should come back and plead to me on her bended knees, madly as I love her, my outraged pride would rebel so fiercely, I could not forgive her. I would never take her back. If she has gone—with another—I will avenge the Esmond honor to the death!" And, as he spoke, he put the child down hastily, and strode from the room, and from the house, with the screams of both Ruby and the nurse ringing in his ears; the former realizing only this—that her father was going far away from her.

And the latter, realizing some great evil, with spread wings, was hovering over the house of Esmond.

She took little Ruby in her arms, and sought to pacify her. She knew not what answer to make to her questions.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"IT DOES NOT MATTER WHAT BECOMES OF ME,—I WOULD RATHER DIE THAN LIVE."

"Sparkles the dew and shines the river,
Glitters the tear in the lily's bell,
Two are walking apart forever—
And wave their hands in a mute farewell."

GREAT sorrow prevailed among the servants when they discovered—as servants always do—what had transpired.

They talked the situation over freely among themselves.

The world always condemns woman, without mercy, where there is the least excuse to pass judgment upon her.

The servants discussed the situation, wondering vaguely why their young mistress had suddenly left her beautiful home, and the handsome young husband and child, both of whom she had appeared to fairly idolize.

There was no lack of love and happiness between husband and wife. They were perfectly sure Mr. Esmond fairly adored his young wife. Ah, well, there was no accounting for the freaks of the grand ladies in high life.

The old housekeeper, Mrs. Perry, who had been in the service of the Esmonds since early childhood, was greatly troubled over the affair. She took charge of the household, waiting patiently the turn of events.

At the end of a week, a change came in the shape of a letter from Mr. Esmond, addressed to the housekeeper.

It was a long letter full of instructions,—"Just like he was preparing to leave the world," muttered the old housekeeper, wiping her spectacles with the corner of her apron. "Ah, me—ah me, what sorrow marrying does bring most of folk, to be sure."

"What a pity it is to see a fine home like this broken up. Little Ruby sent off among friends until she's old enough to be put in a convent, and Master Frederick wandering

the world over in search of a fair, false face—the Lord knows where."

Carefully she read over the last page of his letter, which was briefly as follows,—"Dismiss the servants, and send them away,—not empty-handed, but with a year's stipend each. See that Nannette takes Ruby to the friends I spoke of, without delay; and last, but not least, leave everything about the place just as *she* left it, when she went away."

Mrs. Perry carried out the instructions, faithfully,—in every respect, save one—two of the old servants refused to be sent away.

"We have been in Master Frederick's service, and in the service of his father before him," they both declared, gravely. "Our place is here—more than ever now since trouble has fallen over the house."

So they were left in charge of the place, seeing they would not go.

A few days later, Esmond returned to see if his wishes had been obeyed. As he turned the key in the lock he found that the door was fastened upon the inside—evidently some one was within.

It was opened the next moment by the old footman; the familiar figure of the old butler was in the background.

"You are displeased to see us, master," they both said, huskily, "but oh, Master Frederick, do not send us away;" and when they both knelt before him swearing solemn allegiance to him in life or in death—what could he say or do. They stayed; and perhaps it was their companionship, though they never intruded upon him, that kept him from going mad.

He went but once into the rooms made so dear in the past by *her* sweet presence, and that was to close and fasten the windows and draw the heavy silken curtains. Raising his eyes, he saw a sight that cut him to the heart like the sharp thrust of a sword. It was Irene's portrait, smiling down at him from over the marble mantel. A groan of agony burst from his lips, mingled with a bitter imprecation. With a sudden movement he raised his right arm and turned it with its face toward the wall.

The impulse had been strong within him to hurl it down and set his heel upon it.

"No, no," he muttered, hurrying from the room; "I have loved her too well for that; and Heaven help me, I love her still."

With trembling hands he closed the door after him, after taking one last, lingering look within, as though to impress every object on his memory—as one looks back at the dark recesses of a vault wherein his dead lies.

Then, drawing the key from the lock, he strode out into the grounds and threw the key far from him in the tanglewood.

What he suffered during the days that followed only Heaven understood, and his two old servants knew.

For days and nights at a time he would pace the floor of his room suffering the tortures of the rack, in vain endeavors to teach himself to "live and learn to forget" until at length exhausted nature sunk him into the merciful oblivion of deep, dreamless sleep.

At length, the two old servants prevailed upon him to leave the villa forever.

The day came at length on which he was to take his departure—and it was just three weeks since the eventful day this great sorrow, the first he had ever known, had fallen upon him. The cleverest secret service men in all Europe had been employed by Esmond, to discover if there was any possible clew as to where Irene had gone.

Then it was the startling discovery came to Esmond, that Victor Ross, Irene's old lover, was at the hospital. Some one of the attendants remembered seeing the lady meet the gentleman quite unexpectedly, face to face, in the grounds—she had thrown up her white arms and fell forward in a deep swoon. The young doctor had caught her and held her in his arms while the attendant ran for water, instead of placing her on one of the garden benches, and, as the attendant returned, she saw through the branches of the trees, Dr. Ross kissing the white face. As soon as she had brought the water, the attendant was summarily dismissed.

That night, Dr. Ross suddenly disappeared from the hospital. One of the porters at the railway station recognized the young doctor, in one of the compartments of the foremost coach of the Edinburgh express which steamed out of London at nine o'clock at night on that particular evening.

It transpired that the handsome young doctor did not go alone; he was accompanied by a lady heavily veiled, who clung to his arm, sobbing bitterly, and whom he tried in vain to soothe.

They broke all this very gently to Esmond, not one of the secret-service men detailed to work up the case, doubted for a moment but that this settled the matter as to how and when young Mrs. Esmond had gone, and that she had not gone—alone.

All efforts to trace the doctor and the lady, seemed futile, however.

It was then that London society had been shocked by the application by Frederick Esmond, for a divorce from his beautiful young wife.

On the threshold of the villa as they were leaving it, Esmond paused:

"I shall never enter this door again," he cried, raising his hand in the sunlight, as though registering a vow to the blue, smiling heavens.

"You have both sworn to cleave to me in life or in death," he reminded them, "now both of you, mark well what I say, from this time on, I am a man with but one purpose—one object in his breast—and that is, to find Dr. Ross. I shall not be answerable for what will happen after that. I will avenge the Esmond honor if I have to wade through seas of blood to do it."

Neither spoke for some moments. At length, the butler placed his hand on his excited young master's arm.

"May I make so bold as to ask you if you mean to challenge him to a duel, Master Frederick?" he asked, fearfully.

"Yes," responded Esmond, grimly, "many a man would shoot him down on the spot, with less provocation than I have. I would give even a dog a chance for its life."

"He is considered the best shot in the country, Master Frederick," urged the old butler in distress, "what if you should be the one to—to—"

"To fall," supplemented Esmond, adding recklessly, "It does not matter what becomes of me, I would rather die than live."

"Think of the little one, Master Frederick,—dear little

Miss Ruby,—Oh, forgive me for reminding you,—you have her to think of,—you must take care of yourself for *her* sake."

"I shall avenge the Esmond honor for her sake as well as my own," returned Frederick. "Say no more on the subject, nothing can change my determination. I will search the world through until I find Ross—then let Heaven show mercy to the one that deserves it."

"Did you do as I bade you: telegraph Nannette, my child's nurse, to have little Ruby at the cross-roads when the train came in? We have five minutes at the station, not more."

"I did, sir," responded the butler; "Nannette is faithful, if she knew you were to pass through the village she would have been sure to have brought Ruby to the station to see you, anyhow, were it only for a moment. But I must remind you, Master Frederick, if we are to catch the express we must be making our way to the station now," he declared.

Without one backward glance, Frederick Esmond passed down through the avenue of over-arching beeches and away from the home he was never destined to behold again.

As he reached the high arched entrance gate, he paused a moment—a rush of memory had nearly overpowered him.

He was thinking that it seemed as if it were only yesterday that he had brought Irene there—a bride; and how his cheeks had flushed and his heart beat as the carriage drew near that gate, for as they both raised their eyes they saw the words "Welcome home," over the great arch, and he had turned to Irene, and said—"Yes, welcome home, my beauteous bride—my darling Irene!" Ah, how bitter was that memory to the broken-hearted man who was leaving that home forever. At the station, Frederick Esmond and Dr. Ross met face to face—and that was the beginning of the bitter end.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"GOD MUST LISTEN TO THE PRAYER OF A LITTLE CHILD AND HEED IT."

It was a lovely morning; the sun shone and the birds sang as though there was no such thing as sorrow or care in the great, busy world of men.

It was a pretty woodland scene; a deep cool dell, carpeted with wild flowers and green moss, with the sunshine filtering down through the swaying branches of the trees upon the nodding grasses; and it shines, too, upon a pretty cascade leaping from rock to rock down the steep hillside, which tosses up its white spray to the morning light.

How strange it seemed that such a spot should be chosen as the scene of a deadly encounter. How cruel it seemed that the pale primroses and nodding daisies should, ere the sun set, be stained with a human being's life blood!

Two figures sit on a huge gray rock by the brook-side.

They are little Ruby and her nurse Nannette.

"I am so tired, Nan," says the child, slipping off the rock, and throwing herself face downward in the long, waving grass, and tossing her hat beside her. Where are we going, now? what was it you had to tell me if I was a very good little girl?"

Nannette shifted about uneasily, under the searching gaze of those dark, childish eyes.

"Would you like to see your papa, Miss Ruby?" she asked, slowly.

The child sprung up with a cry. "My papa, Nannette! oh, yes—yes, so much; you *know* I would. But, Nannette, I want to see mamma so much, even more than I—do—papa. Oh, Nannette, papa forbade me to speak of my mamma; but, I—I—can't help it, Nanny, I want her so much."

"It's only natural," murmured Nannette, compassionately, as she stroked the child's fair flaxen curls.

"But you have not answered me, Miss Ruby," she said, eagerly.

"Would you like to see your papa?"

Ruby bowed her curly head very gravely.

"Then you shall, Ruby," she declared.

"Do you see the station over yonder?" she inquired, again.

Ruby assented, eagerly.

"Your papa will be there at ten o'clock this morning," Nannette went on, consulting the letter she had received a few days previous, for the twentieth time;—"but he is not coming to stay. You are to be with him only a little while; then you are to come away quietly with me. You wont cling to him and beg to remain with him if I take you to him, will you, little Ruby?"

"Not if I can help it, Nanny," replied the child, truthfully; "for, oh I'm so lonesome here. When *are* we going home, Nannette?"

Tears came to Nannette's eyes. "I don't know," she answered, drearily,—"perhaps never again."

"But I miss my dolls and my toys—my own nice room, and the lawns," sighed the child. "I am going to ask papa to take me home," she declared; "or, where my mamma is."

"You will make him feel real bad if you do," said Nannette. "Your home is all broken up now, Ruby." At that moment the shriek of a far-off train fell upon their ears.

Nannette sprung to her feet. "Come, Ruby," she cried, "we haven't much time to get to the station."

They reached the platform just as the express dashed pantingly up to the station—and in that moment, John, the butler, who was Frederick Esmond's valet now, sprung from the railway carriage, having been watching for Nannette, and hurried breathlessly to meet her.

"For the love of Heaven take little missy away from here, quick, Nannette," he cried, without waiting to exchange greetings with the pretty maid, and, stooping down, he whispered a sentence in her ear that made Nannette recoil with terror—uttering a wild, sharp cry.

"You must take Ruby away at once," warned John,

"the sight of her would unnerve him past all recall; he is on this train."

And to the child's great wonderment, Nannette, with a face white as death, picked her up in her strong young arms, fairly flying from the spot with her, and crying the while as though her heart would break, as she vainly pleaded with Ruby to stop crying—"Papa, papa; I want to see papa, Nannette," and stop struggling in her arms.

Something in Nannette's white terror-stricken face struck awe to the child's heart, in spite of her rising rebellion.

"Why didn't you let me see my papa," cried Ruby, stamping her little foot, and crying out vehemently, when Nannette, at last, released her, unable to carry her heavy burden another step, and had sunk almost fainting by the wayside.

"Oh, Ruby, poor little Ruby," she cried, grasping both of the child's little hands, "let us kneel right down here in the long grass, and ask the good Lord to take care of your poor dear papa in this awful hour. He is in awful danger. Oh, Ruby, Ruby, pray for your papa, as you never prayed for him in your life before—pray hard."

"I don't know what to say, Nannette," said the child, in bewilderment;—"I've forgot what comes after 'Now I lay me down to sleep.'"

"Oh, never mind that one; pray for your poor papa, Ruby, dear," sobbed Nannette.

"That always comes first," persisted the child; "oh, no, it don't, Nanny, I forgot: its three weeks now since I said my prayers—since—since the night mamma went away—I guess they commence with, Our Father, which art in Heaven. Isn't that it, Nanny?"

The girl nodded, too convulsed with sobs to speak, she could only articulate over and over again, "Pray hard for your papa, Ruby, and God and the listening angels *must* hear you. Say, God spare my papa's life this day."

Surely there was no sight under the light of Heaven more touching, than little Ruby as she knelt down in the long, green grass, and clasped her little white hands, raising her sweet childish face to the summer sunshine.

"God spare my papa," she lisped, "and—and—my mamma. I want them, send them both to me, and I will be so good, Lord,—I'll not tear my frocks or break my dolls, unless I can't help it. Oh I forgot, Lord, I want

to pray for nothing but just papa, Nannette says. Give papa his daily bread, God, and—and—"

"And spare his life this day," said Nannette, through her tears, and the childish voice repeated the words after her.

Surely God and the listening angels grouped about the Great White Throne, who knew what was to take place within that fatal hour, would listen to the prayer of that innocent child and heed it.

Nannette rose from her knees and brushed the tears from her eyes. Ruby followed her example.

"Come away from the glen, Ruby," she murmured faintly, "every sound I hear from afar off sounds like—like—oh! never mind what it sounds like—come away!"

In hurrying so desperately along Nannette must have struck into the wrong path, for, to her bewilderment she soon found they were in the labyrinth of a deep wood; this was surely not the way into the grounds of the villa where they were stopping.

"I cannot go any further, Nannette," declared Ruby, wearily. "I awfully tired; let's sit down here and rest."

Nannette's mind was too full of a harrowing thought to think of rest.

"I'll carry you," she said. She pushed on bravely with Ruby—but this child of four—as plump as a partridge—was no light burden for Nannette; she soon found her strength was again failing her, and each step, to her horror and consternation seemed to lead her still further into the heart of the deep silent wood—no matter which way she turned.

The girl's soul grew faint with fright. She would not tell little Ruby they had lost their way—at least not yet, still, in the face of it all, what should she do? Ruby was not able to take another step.

"Heaven help me I—I—do not know what will happen next," thought Nannette, perplexedly, "there has never been a day so fraught with horrors to me."

Was it only her fancy or did she hear voices from afar off?

Nannette stopped short and listened. She could faintly distinguish the sound of far off voices and she determined to make her way in that direction at all hazards.

"Can you walk a little further, Ruby dear?" she asked, anxiously.

"I'll try," said Ruby, "but I'm awfully tired; see I've walked a big hole right through my bran new slippers."

"Never mind," said Nannette, soothingly.

"But I *do* mind," declared Ruby, "for now the sharp acorn tops and the sticks and stones hurt my foot just awfully."

Greatly as her arms ached, Nannette could not stop to consider that, again she caught Ruby up in her arms, striving with might and main to reach the place from whence the sound of voices proceeded.

Slowly but surely she neared them, at length to her great joy she found she was emerging from the wood; a bend in her path soon brought her to a clearing, and looking ahead, to her great consternation, she found herself in the very glen from which she had fled so precipitately a little while since; she had taken a circuitous route—and found herself in the very spot she had been warned to flee from, and the sight that met her gaze straight ahead, she never forgot while her life lasted.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"I COMMAND YOU TO SPEAK—WHAT IS THIS MAN TO YOU?"

On the same forenoon on which the doctor had taken his departure, Irene also bade the farmer's wife farewell.

"If you would but stay until Jack comes back," said Mrs. Clyde, holding the slim white hand, "he will be very angry at me for letting you go without giving him the opportunity of bidding you good-bye."

"Tell your son good-bye for me," returned Irene. She pressed a roll of bills into the rough, toil-worn hand of the farmer's wife.

"You have been very kind to a helpless stranger," she said. "Let me repay you as best I can; every kind action to the helpless meets its reward in God's own good time, you will one day meet yours.

"Which way do you go?" Mrs. Clyde asked sympathizingly.

"I must confess I have not quite made up my mind," returned Irene.

"There never was a creature more forlorn—and more hopelessly adrift on the world," muttered Mrs. Clyde, gazing after the slim figure, with tears in her eyes.

She watched her out of sight, and she never saw again the girl whom she knew only as Irene.

Irene's way led through one of the most picturesque parts of the valley of Kent. It was quite three miles to the station, and although weak from her recent illness, she concluded to walk there; she could rest by the wayside if she felt faint and fatigued.

Suddenly, in turning an abrupt curve in the wooded road, she came to an open glade with a stream of pure, clear, purling water, running through it, and a beautiful miniature cascade leaping and laughing in the morning sunlight,—ah, such a cool, restful place.

A party of merry youths and maidens had gathered the glen, and Irene saw that a picnic was in progress.

Irene watched the scene with fascinated eyes. "Was I ever young and gay like that?" she murmured, vaguely; "it seems as though centuries of sorrow had passed over my head.

The light, airy costumes of the young girls, blended with the rainbow hues of the silken scarfs of the May-pole around which they were dancing.

How happy their rollicking young voices sounded, how bright their faces. How they enjoyed the simple music, of an old violin very much out of tune, and a banjo quite as much so, to which their flying feet kept time.

At a little distance a bevy of pretty girls were spreading a long, snowy cloth, preparing for the lunch, and a little further on, two young men were putting up a swing.

Irene watched the scene wistfully. Weak and exhausted she had sunk down on a mossy log, around which scarlet creepers grew in rich luxuriance.

From her position she could see and yet not be seen through the intervening branches of the trees.

Suddenly the sound of horse's hoofs fell upon her ear, and a moment later Jack Clyde sprang from his horse and dashed among the group of merry-makers.

"Oh," cried the girls in a chorus, "it's Jack Clyde rushing among us in this summary fashion.—Look! his face is as white as though he had seen a ghost."

"Well, you would'nt be laughing and dancing like this if you knew what was going to happen hereabouts, mighty soon," he retorted.

"Oh, what is it, Jack, do tell us about it; don't keep us in suspense," the young girls cried, crowding curiously about him.

"Well, its a first class duel," returned young Clyde, adding: "if you want to set yourself up as targets for a stray pistol shot, I'd advise you to stay here."

There was a loud chorus of screams, and the frightened young girls scurried off in all directions, like a covey of partridges.

The young men remained behind, crowding around their informant, breathlessly inquiring:

"How do you know there's going to be a duel, Jack?"

"When is it to take place, Jack?"

"Who are the men, and what's it all about, Jack?"

"One question at a time, if you please, gentlemen," says

Jack Clyde, throwing himself down full length on the green grass.

"The duel is to take place in this exact spot, twenty yards from the cascade yonder, and it's two swell Londoners who are going to blaze away at each other.

"I heard the whole quarrel between them, and a mighty fierce one it was too, I can tell you, and," he added, with a hard laugh, "as you can always depend upon—it was about a woman, fair of face and false at heart—such a fair woman as was especially born to break the hearts of men and befool them."

"Let's hear all about it, Jack?"

"How did you happen to find it out, Jack?"

"Give us the facts, Jack?" they all cried out, excitedly, in a chorus again.

"One question at a time, if you please, gentlemen," repeated Jack with exasperating slowness, and emphasizing the last four words. "Well, to give you the whole story. As I was waiting at the London depot to take the train, the Liverpool express steamed in, and from one of the forward coaches a tall and remarkably handsome man alighted. But hold—I am a little ahead of my story—I had forgotten to state that, as I stood on the platform waiting for my train, I observed, standing a few feet from me, a gentleman, accompanied by a valet and another servant. His face was pale and he seemed to be laboring under some great excitement.

"'From this hour I shake the dust of London from my feet forever,' he said, huskily. 'I shall travel about the face of the earth knowing no rest until I have found *him*,' he added, fairly grinding his teeth with impotent rage. 'And when I do, I—'

"The sentence never was finished, a cry that sounded like nothing human, broke from the gentleman's lips; his eyes had at that moment rested on the man alighting from the train.

"With one single bound he had reached his side, had caught him in a grip like steel, and had almost shaken the breath from his body.

"'Where is my wife!' he thundered, in an awful voice. 'Speak, or I'll murder you! Speak, Dr. Ross!'

"'Unhand me,' exclaimed the man, angrily, haughtily 'How should I know the whereabouts of your wife?'

"'Liar! scoundrel! you *do* know!' screamed the other. 'You left the city with her, Victor Ross. *You* are the attraction that took Irene visiting the hospital, curse you!'

"'You do me too much honor, I assure you,' sneered the man, twisting nonchalantly at his thick, dark mustache with his white hand, on which a fiery diamond set in a serpent's head, representing an eye, gleamed, glowed, and scintillated like a thing of life.

"'Out with it, where is she?' foamed his antagonist. 'Speak, or by the Heaven that bends above us I will have your life!'

"'I refuse to be questioned,' cried the doctor, defiantly.

"'I ask you for the first and last time: what was it that passed between you and Irene at the hospital on the day she fled from me?' cried the infuriated husband. 'You see I have unearthed that, and I have been like a sleuth-hound on your track ever since. Will you speak?' and the steel grip tightened about the doctor's neck, who was trying in vain to shake himself free.

"'I refuse to answer you,' repeated the doctor. 'That is my reply.'

"There and then there was a challenge to a duel and it was as quickly accepted, and when the friends who had gathered about them during the *mêlee*, talked the affair over, I heard them say—twenty miles down the country, in Cascade Glen, Piney Woods—at once.

"This appeared to be satisfactory to both parties concerned. They made a strange compact, however, and that was that one should reach Piney Woods by one train, and the other go by another route. Both trains reach the station at about the same time. As the parties hurried away, I heard one of the by-standers say:

"'Dr. Ross is a villain. He will reach the station first and he will shoot his antagonist on sight as he steps from the train. His bullet will be unerring—he is a dead shot, and the man of all others to take an ignoble advantage of friend or foe. He will not wait to meet him in a duel if he can get a lead on him.'"

There was a loud crashing in the bushes near, like the sound of a heavy falling body.

"What is that?" they echoed, turning hastily about.

"Probably an elk crashing through the underbrush,"

said Clyde, adding: "Well, boys, I'm off. I'm sorry I cannot stay and see the 'affair of honor,' as the Frenchmen phrase it. Let me know which gets the best of the fracas."

"When did you say it was to take place?" asked one of the excited group.

"As soon as they can reach this spot from the depot," returned Clyde. "That is, as I said before, if the doctor does not pop the other one over as he steps from the train. Every one has a sort of presentiment that that is exactly what will occur."

Clyde moved off and his friends started across lots in a body to watch the two trains come in; and even at that moment they could hear the shrill, far-off whistle of a locomotive.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DUEL IN THE GLEN.

CLEARLY through the solemn stillness of the summer day the words that had fallen from Clyde's lips, fell upon the heart of the beautiful solitary figure crouching among the wild lilac branches.

The swaying figure had sunk down among the sharp thorns and the brambles, but she did not even feel the pain of them. The earth seemed to rock under her feet, the leaves of the trees above her head to moan with each passing breeze.

If the hand of God had stricken Irene dead, the beautiful white face upturned to the sunlit sky could not have been whiter. No pen can describe the awful agony of that moment. Terrible cries fell freely on the air, startling the timid birds from their nests in the trees overhead.

"Ah! God pity me and have mercy," she sobbed, wildly; "it is Frederick my—my husband who is to fight this duel with Dr. Ross, I must save him, I *will* save him or die in the attempt."

It was two good miles yet to the station; ah, how should she ever make it.

It must have been Providence that turned her dazed eyes to the road, for she saw at that moment a hansom-cab passing. She hailed the driver, and the man looked in wonder at the beautiful young woman standing there in the dust of the wayside.

"Can you take me to the railway station quick?" she cried; "I will give you double your fee—aye, quadruple it."

The man hesitated.

"It is out of my way, miss," he replied; "I am sorry to refuse you, but I cannot turn back."

"You must—oh, sir, you must," she cried, holding out her hands supplicatingly, "a human life depends on it.

I will pay you any price you ask—only take me to the station."

"I couldn't go for less than a pound," declared the man. The money was instantly placed in his hand.

The drive to the station was quickly made, though a round-about route was obliged to be taken, owing to one of the bridges that spanned a deep creek having been washed away by an overflow the day previous.

When Irene reached the station, she found to her terror the train had arrived some time ago, and that a party of gentlemen had come in on it; they had telegraphed in advance for two coaches to meet them at the station, and they gave the order to the glen in Piney woods.

"A surgeon attended the party, carrying a little black case. I imagined that a duel must be on the *tapis*," declared the loquacious station master, "and if that is the case, the affair must be pretty nigh over by this time."

He never forgot the terrible cry that fell from the white-faced lady regarding him; without a word she turned and fled, and was just in time to intercept the driver who had brought her there, as he had gathered up his reins to depart.

"You must take me back to the glen in Piney woods," she gasped. "It took us three quarters of an hour to get here; get back in half of that time and I will give you three pounds."

"Get into the cab, miss," said the driver; "I will do my best to earn the money, but you see for yourself how bad the roads are."

Another instant and the cab was whirling along with lightning-like rapidity over the uneven road.

It was a ride never to be forgotton. A strong hand held the reins and urged the frightened animals to do their best, the vehicle whirling and dashing along with its occupant swayed to and fro like a leaf in the gale. In after years when Irene looked back at that perilous ride, she wondered that she had not died in the terrible excitement of that awful moment, the horses rearing and plunging down the grade of the steep hill—the white-faced driver, spurred on by her frantic appeals to drive faster—they were but creeping along—plied the whip with a steady hand, making each stroke tell upon the quiver*ing, panting* beasts.

"Oh God, let me be in time to save my love," was the constant prayer that broke with a moan over Irene's white lips; would she reach the glen in time to prevent it?

How peaceful the hills and vales looked in the golden glow of the sunlight. Alas! that their tranquillity should be broken by the moans of the dying, and the blood of a human heart lave the modest violets and tender grasses.

"Five minutes more and we shall reach the glen," said the driver; "see, there is the cascade ahead."

He saw her white lips move, but no sound came from them. Three—four—minutes passed.

Irene, watching breathlessly ahead sees two dark forms facing each other, standing ten paces apart on the green sward.

Both seconds, as well as the principles, hear that sound of crashing wheels, but neither pay the least heed. It comes nearer—so near that Irene can distinguish the voices—she tries to cry out, but her lips seem stricken dumb.

Ah! God have mercy. She hears the query: "Are you ready, gentlemen?"

Both incline their heads, and she hears the death-knell in the command uttered: one—two—three—ready—fire!

And with the command, two sharp reports ring out simultaneously on the air.

But neither are destined to reach their mark. The dust-covered cab has dashed between, hiding the combatants from each other's view, and the two bullets are buried deep in the wood-work of the vehicle.

And through the smoke and confusion which ensues, both of the combatants hear a woman's voice which both recognize, crying out:

"For the love of Heaven, don't fire again."

The smoke cleared away and the hansom-cab from which Irene has sprung has dashed on some distance.

She holds out her white hands to Esmond, crying again, "Don't fire again,—don't!—I—"

A bitter smile curls Esmond's lips, he looks at her with wrathy, blazing eyes.

"Have you followed your lover here to plead with me

not to wreak my outraged vengeance upon him?" he asked, sneeringly.

She looks at him, but she could not grow paler than she already is, for those words have cut her to the very soul.

"Hear me, my husband," she cried, "he," pointing to Dr. Ross—"he is not my lover, you must not say that."

"Will you tell me what this secret between you two is?" cried Esmond, in a terrible voice. "Speak—I *command* you. Prove if you can that he is nothing to you. Has he a secret of yours to keep?"

"She cowered from the terrible glance he bent upon her and he noticed that, and he laughed aloud, she would rather have heard any sound on earth, than that terrible laughter.

Seeing *she* will not answer, I turn to you, giving you a last chance, Dr. Ross,—will you reveal what there is between yourself and—her?"

A sneering smile curved Ross' lips.

"I refuse to speak," he replied, "I pledged her my solemn oath that my lips should be sealed through life, aye, even on my death bed, unless she bade me—confess all."

A deathlike silence fell upon the little group.

"No more need be said," returned Esmond, grimly. "Stand aside, madam," he said, coolly turning to Irene, "and permit this man and myself, to proceed to business."

"Oh, no! no! no!" cried Irene, falling on her knees with a piercing cry, "this duel must not go on, you shall not risk your life for me, Dr. Ross, even to spare me," she sobbed, desperately.

At that moment the shrill treble of a child's voice broke in upon their startled ears.

"I told you, Nannette, that was my papa—oh, papa, papa!" she cried, joyfully, as she ran toward him. She had not as yet caught sight of the face of the kneeling figure, but as Irene heard her voice, she forgot all else, springing to her feet crying out with her whole soul in her anguished cry: "Oh, Ruby—my child—my child!"

Esmond sprung between them, his face white as death.

"Do not dare to touch my child," he cried. "I will not permit it."

Again Irene shrunk back.

"Frederick," she murmured, "your cruelty is killing me."

The scene was all the more affecting when Ruby recognized her mother and struggled with piercing cries to break from her father's arms to the embrace of her mother. It was a scene that would have brought tears to eyes least used to them.

Like a beautiful hunted deer brought to bay, Irene turned slowly and faced them.

"Hush, my darling," she sobbed, "papa will not let you come to mamma just now."

"I will spare the truth no longer," she cried, "I will tell you the terrible secret which Dr. Ross *by chance* discovered, and which he pledged himself never to reveal, and which has driven me *mad.* It is this—I—Oh, God! how shall I utter the words and live, but they must be spoken. I—*I am not your lawful wedded wife!* Frederick."

A thunderbolt, falling from a clear sky—the earth suddenly opening under his feet could not have astounded Frederick Esmond more. He could not credit the evidence of his own senses.

"What," he cried, "I am not sure that I have heard aright."

With a piteous sob, Irene sunk on her knees before him, repeating in a hushed, awful voice: "I am not your lawful wedded wife, Frederick."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WITHOUT LOVE THE WORLD IS A DESERT—WITH LOVE, THE WORLD IS A PARADISE.

"LISTEN, Frederick," she pleaded, "and as you are strong, be merciful. I will tell you the whole story from beginning to end, and you shall judge then whether I have been more sinned against than sinning."

All subterfuge was at an end now—she might as well tell him the whole truth, just as matters stood. She broke at once into her subject by saying:—

"Before I ever learned to love you. Frederick, I was persuaded into wedding another."

She saw the horrible words strike him as lightning strikes a mighty forest oak; he trembled from head to foot; those startling words seemed to have fairly left him lifeless, incapable of speech or motion.

"On the day that I was wed," continued Irene, "aye, the very hour—my husband was taken from me, arrested and thrown into prison. Soon after I heard that he died, that he perished in the fire of the London prison. His name headed the list of the prisoners who were killed.

"Then—you—you—asked me to be your wife, Frederick. I loved you, and, thinking I could keep the skeleton of the past from you forevermore, and that you would never find it out, I married you. And oh! Frederick, we were so happy." This with a wail most pitiful to hear.

"My God!" The words break from Esmond's ashen lips. He leans heavily back against the trunk of an adjacent tree, still holding his child in his arms. He would have spoken, but Irene held up her white right hand with a gesture commanding silence.

"Hear me through," she said, continuing: "You know how happy we were; it is useless to refer to that. No cloud darkened my life; forever and anon I assured my-

self the past was buried, its ghost would never rise to confront me. It grew to seem more like a hideous dream —a nightmare than a reality.

"The day I went to visit the patients at the hospital was the beginning of the cruel end. In passing through one of the wards I made a discovery so horrible I wonder it did not kill me on the spot. I—ah! how shall I tell it —I saw him—the man whom I had wedded and had believed dead all these years. *He was blind*, and therefore could not recognize me. In the hour of my terrible discovery, I uttered that which revealed the whole truth to Dr. Ross, who had come upon the scene unnoticed by me and had therefore heard all. I begged him on my knees to keep my cruel secret, and he gave me his solemn vow that he would do this if I left you and your child forevermore. I went—but not with him. I went alone!"

"The lady whom you have so repeatedly referred to as having accompanied me from London, on the night in question, was my mother," said Dr. Ross, haughtily.

"Forgive me. I have bitterly wronged you, Dr. Ross," said Esmond. Then he turned to Irene, addressing her, forgetful of every other presence—even that of a man and woman, dusty and travel-stained who had come upon the scene unnoticed, as Irene commenced her narrative, and had stood quite still listening intently to every word that fell from her lips.

"God pity us both, Irene," cried Esmond, hoarsely, as she ceased speaking. "Speak," he added, in a voice tremulous with mighty emotion, "who is the man who—who has the right to claim you?"

"The man whom I then imagined was my cousin, Karl Heathcliff. I—I wedded—Leon Forrester!" she replied.

"He of all men, Great Heaven!" groaned Esmond. "It is farewell here—now and forever!" he added, huskily.

"Hold! let me speak," broke in an eager voice in a decided English accent. "I came in search of Dr. Ross, and it appears as if I am here in the nick of time." They all looked and beheld Dr. Lennox.

"I have heard all. Now listen all to what I have to say. The man Leon Forrester died two hours since in the St. Thomas hospital. It was occasioned by hearing suddenly the voice of a new nurse we had just employed.

The reason her voice affected him so was, because she was his wife whom he had deserted years ago."

"You know me, lady," said the woman, holding out her hands to Irene.

Irene looked; yes, she remembered the thin white face and haunting eyes. She was the creature whom she had saved that night a few weeks since from throwing herself from London Bridge, at midnight, down into the deep, dark waters rolling swiftly below.

"On his death-bed, Forrester made a full and complete confession of all Mrs. Esmond has said, and in the presence of a notary who took his dying deposition, added:—'Irene Middleton believed she was my wife, poor girl; but, dying, I solemnly swear that she was not. The marriage was null and void, because at that time I had a living wife. I meant to wed the heiress because I had learned to love her with all the love of my passionate heart, defying God and man as to the consequences. but

'Man proposes, and God disposes.'

My fate overtook me on the very threshold of my happiness and foiled me. On my death-bed I have set matters aright.'"

"Frederick! oh, Frederick!" sobbed Irene.

Frederick Esmond held out his arms to his wife, and she flew into them like a wounded bird. He clasped his strong arms close about her, holding her tightly as those strong arms would hold and shield her forevermore, kissing the pale face, the lovely lips and dark, curling hair that lay on the white forehead.

"Aren't you and mamma going to kiss me too?" cried Ruby, rather nonplussed at this extraordinary scene, and so glad to see her "mamma and papa pleased with each other again," as she whispered to Nannette.

Esmond caught up the child and placed her in Irene's arms, straining them both in his arms, murmuring:—"Irene, my wife, mine—thank God!—from first to last!" and tears shone in his eyes as he spoke.

"I think I may as well leave this scene of domestic felicity," said Dr. Ross, turning with a sneer to his second. "I am not needed here."

Esmond hurried forward and held out his hand to Victor Ross. "I have wronged you, Dr. Ross," he said,

manfully, "and here and now I beg your pardon most humbly for it. Will you shake hands?"

"No," returned Ross, bitterly. "You and I are bitter enemies to the death, Frederick Esmond. You have won from me the only woman in this wide world whom I have ever loved or ever shall love. To pretend that I have a feeling of friendship for you, by touching your hand, would be an untruth. I can only add, I wish the duel had not been postponed;—I am a dead shot—you would have fallen, and then she would have been free." As he spoke he turned on his heel, and in so doing stumbled and fell, discharging the revolver which he still held in his hand; and in an instant the red life-blood was flowing from a wound in his temple.

All that human aid could do was done to save Dr. Ross by the surgeon, who was fortunately on the spot, but, without avail.

"Is it death?" he whispered.

"Yes," answered the surgeon.

The wounded man beckoned Esmond to him.

"Forget and forgive the words I have just uttered, as you wish to be forgiven," he murmured, with difficulty, whispering: "I have a last prayer to make you, you will not refuse, *she* will not refuse, she is so kind and good. Remember, I am dying."

"If there is anything Irene or I can do for you, rest assured it will be done," answered Frederick Esmond, gravely.

"It is only this," murmured Victor Ross, his pride and hauteur humbled to the dust now: "As my eyes close in death, let them rest on the face that has been my loadstar through life. Plead with Irene to come and kneel beside me. It will be but for a few fleeting moments; it can do her no harm, and I shall drift to the shores of that unknown sphere—in peace."

"You will do this, Irene?" said Esmond.

Without a word she took her place beside the dying man in the long rush grass, and whispered holy words to him, praying that Heaven would receive him through the beautiful gates that were standing ajar.

He heard, and the look of gratitude in his eyes she never forgot. His last prayer was granted, he died,

looking upon the beautiful, noble face he had loved better than anything else in this world.

That very day Frederick Esmond took his wife and child travelling on the continent. Nothing could induce him to return to London, where he had suffered so much.

"I have closed the villa, locked your apartments and thrown the key away," he said. "We will leave them to the dust of years. The world is wide; we can make for ourselves a beautiful home elsewhere, and commence life anew. And in that new life," he added, "we will make a solemn compact to have no secrets from each other. All that we have undergone might have been spared if you had trusted me at first, Irene."

A certain court proceeding which had been duly filed was taken quietly from the docket, therefore never came to trial. Thus, the bonds that united Irene and Frederick Esmond, happily, were never severed.

The services of Nannette were dispensed with, she was pensioned and sent away. Frederick Esmond could not endure that any one should be around him who knew of that dark epoch in their lives.

On picking up a London paper one day, they read of the marriage of Dr. Lennox and Jessie Reynolds.

Marie Montalti, the Italian woman, who came again in search of Mrs. Esmond, and ran across her while travelling, making another appeal to her for money, was met by Irene's husband, who threatened her with being summarily dealt with if she did not leave the country at once, which she was only too glad to do when she found out the exact situation of affairs.

The Duchess of Heath often heard from Irene. Bright, crispy, newsy letters they were, but always containing this one sentence first and last: How happy she was in the love of her husband and little Ruby, often declaring Frederick was more fond of her than when he was only Miss Middleton's Lover.

The duchess would close the letters with a smile, murmuring, "I am glad Irene is so happy. Ah well, what more contentment has life to offer than perfect love. Without love, life is a dreary waste, a desert. With love, it is a paradise on earth.

THE END.

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